Marcel Ray Duriez

Nevaeh

Book: 28

Heart-to-Heart's

‘Dedicated to the girl, that plays in my mind.’

…And, to my dad rest in peace, Raymond ‘Buddy’ Duriez, 1957 to 1993.

Quote- ‘I feel LOVE for people, that I have loved, and that is so beautiful, I think that’s such an important lesson for children, that people can have disagreements,’ but it does not mean one is bad, and one is good. The worst would pain over not smelling and tearing over it.’

-Anna Kendrick

Interval

Kellie-

The climax of you-

My most prized possession

Kelly passed on- hell's- yes, I wanted it! I recall saying- she said- I cannot have this thing in my room or Jenny is going to mucky swing it and break it for me. You can have your N-word BOY-sh baby shit rip- you can have your pc beats I think too. The world has gone crazy passing up this or it smashed?

Yes, plain real shit is gay, or so her friends said- like- to her to give it up. They said that she could never- ever wrap her hand around the neck of a guitar and play like she doses, okay she did this- It was said to me, and I now have this to show you and play- that my grandmother, had this made.

A Gibson guitar pink body into lavender- and this was the neatest thing a 17 inch with body, 17-inch body height, and a nick 18 inches long, with four skews holding it on the form the back; and the dumb-looking to me and

you, but right for a girl I feel that it is… a custom nick for her with other parts made to fit her tinny body parts and hands so you can rap the nick, wood-tick and heavy yet no over- and hard-nock- nock- nock, yet semi-hollow, and the sin custom pickups that you can know about- 2 humbuckers. She wanted to make it sound like mom's finder yet better.

Do not ask she said just make it. N sound holes. Fender nobs the tall ones, that light up, light on the inside, pink on a toggle switch at the nobs- in

silver, painted out headstock 3 inches wide by seven high, look if so, right to me also. It has hips, covers, and looks sexy a girl like me loves that also- other then it being kick ass. It was made in my pap's shop. Do you see the wood in this thing oak from their tree or so the story goes? Rosewood fretboard, and several and bird and Lily inlays.

Look at the big photo like the picture of her on the back, the thing a has a fifties look- right? white pickguard- who does that? Cord jack on the said white piping, pink amp- with

white stand- she even had an outfit to matches this thing. Look at her picks here four. And the white into pink and lavender fad case, with her face shot on it, like the guitar well you can see the show more- yet classy, as a pin-up on it.

‘You crazy kids know how to spoil a girl.’ I would now I am one of those kid girl teens.

~*~

Un- ah-

Oh-

Umm mm- it is good…

Kellie- The next morning while he- I was bathing, I and he admitted he overdid it last night. He said he was not sorry, but he has not been away from her that long before. Annie smiled and told him it felt good to have him all over her again, she missed it.

Remembering her coming home- ‘Why do I buy cooking magazines in airports? I might as well be buying porn. I get all excited but there's nothing I can do about it.’

After having two orgasms back-to-back last night, I was surprised at

how hard I was, and she has not gotten to the penis wash yet. As she bent down to wash his legs, her face got a helluva slap from that rock-hard penis. While washing his lower body and eye to eye with that rock-hard dick, she asked him if he wanted her right there and right now. Ray lifted her and asked if he could look at her beautiful heels. I knew he wanted her with her big legs behind her head and dried him off to give him as always, what he wants.

I wasted no time… in going after what he requested. He started

slow, to enjoy every stroke. He hit it high, he hit it low. Now and then he floated with the only thing touching was his elbows. This gave him maximum penetration and gave Annie an early orgasm of the squirting kind. Her squirt- hit I squarely in his chest with her large ass up and bent back had her pussy facing forward.

I was now hitting a wet pussy that caused him to let loose his orgasm. Annie tried to pull him off to finish his orgasm off orally, but then again, he was slapping meat that could be heard

all over the house. In the direction of the end of his orgasm… I just rotated her big hips deliberately, and hard against his penis, this caused him to moan. Since Annie was in a position that she could not pat her on back, she patted Ray. He was out of breath, as well as could not talk, nonetheless a little kiss, he gave I told her- job well done.

I laid there, plus watched me going in and out of sleep. When he reached up and touched her face,

besides uttered the words she loves to hear.

(Moring at the café)

I pulled Ray is now out of bed, as well as into the bathroom to bathe him again, all being well this time they can make it through without some make out time. She was wrong, he just grabbed a hand full of her ass in a loving way.

‘Hello, my- honey- my baby.’ I smiled and asked if he wanted breakfast or brunch. I replied, ‘Banquet!’ Is it that late? I said it is

only eight-thirty, but I did not know if you wanted to sleep some more or not.

He told her he will get up now but keep her alluring beautiful ass, away from him. I jumped on top of him and slapped his face with her ass. I cried out, ‘Okay- I give up, sorry but I want you.’

Ray was sitting at the regular breakfast counter, her- I if he missed her. He told her every evening he had room, she comes to his room, so-o he could go to bed early to speed up time just so they could be together. He

missed just looking at her, feeling her close to him, stroking her butt, her breast, as well as, just hugging her tight in him, and her.

He missed her sleeping on top of him, although she does not do at often as she used to. I saw this, besides, started to get up. I told him to sit there, she is just so touched by his words it made her cry. To break the ice- I said- ‘it’s a good thing I wasn’t sitting at your breakfast counter- or I would be in trouble.’ Annie said after what you just said, in trouble no, in my throat,

yes. They both laughed as I placed their breakfast on the counter.

After breakfast, they both retired to the reading room. I with the morning paper, I with a book. He looked at her lying on the sofa with her ass sticking up like two basketballs and just thought about how much fun he is having with it. He saw him and knew what he was thinking. She grabbed a pillow and put it on top of her ass and asked if he wanted one that big. He said- if it is yours, yes, I do.

Cut-

Measure-

It is the complete, 100 percent wrong thing to do, and I stand up- for dinner feeling clean now, buoyant and pleased about everything- me, and the world too. Like the first time, I have felt- oh so healthy, after a long fever, plus doing what I need for me.

On the other hand, then again at dinner, my idiosyncrasy, as well as with it, the sick feeling, my uncertainties- return to me like before. Not sure if I can barely follow the conversation at this point and time.

All I can think of is go…? Why? I do not feel right- I say… bizarrely.

Him- Do not go from me now?

Me- I must go…? Sorry…

Him- Do not go…?

At one point my uncle is telling a story- about one of his customers, and I notice everyone is laughing, so I laugh too with them, nevertheless a little too loud and long with there is, do you see I want to fit in. Do what as they do…

~*~

Part: 1

Marcel turns around, and to my surprise, his face is not cool, calm, and collected at all. It is the weird look, that I have learned- that he has when something is not right. His jaw is at work chomping, as well as his eyes are full of pain, and I can tell he hates himself… over this moment- like for being there, for being the one to say this, for being the one to show me… what on his mind. ‘I’m sorry, Liv,’ he says, I am below him the sign glowers in the darkness currently.

~*~

Humans, unregulated, can be cruel, and tricky; passionate and self-interested; unhappy and cantankerous. It is only after their make-ups and basic emotions have been controlled, that they can be happy, lavish, and moral.

The Book of stuff-

I have the sudden dread, of going any farther, at this phase in my life. That butterfly feeling in the deaths, or the pit of my stomach squeezing up, like a fist in the ovaries, making it hard to breathe, see, and deliberate. I

cannot go on like this- I swear to you, I cannot. I do not want to know- anymore- what up or going down.

Marcel reaches out for me like he is thinking of touching me. Then remembering where we are and commands his arms to his sides. ‘Don’t worry,’ he says. He said- ‘You have friends here.’ She said back- ‘It’s probably not even something to worry about.’

My dialog is rising a little, and I am worried, concerned that I might have a breakdown like always. I lick my

lips, trying to keep it all together. ‘It was probably just a big mistake, I thought unsurely like always with me. We should not have come in the first place, another bad thought within me. I want to go home, ah- another thought to add to the shit heap!’ I know I must sound like a toddler throwing a tantrum, but I cannot help it, you get it to do not you.

Run-

Running out- in the world that is death to me.

Walking through those double doors seems incredible.

‘Liv, come on…. you have to trust me.’

Then she does reach out, for just a second, skating one finger across my forearm. ‘Okay? Trust me.’ Did she say, along with doing you? ‘I do trust you, it’s just… um.’ The air, the disgusting odor, the darkness, and the sensation of rot all around me- so-much. It makes me want to run fast and not stop for anything or anyone.

‘If she is not here… well, that’s not good. On the other hand, if she is… kind of there with me. I ponder- I think it might be even worse than I assumed.’

Marcel watches me closely for a second or more. ‘You have to know, Liv,’ he says finally, firmly, looks and gives, and he is right. I nod to the feelings of this… he gives me the barest glimmer white smile something in a movie, then reaches forward and heaves open the doors toward me or so it seems to be at that moment in my mind only.

We step into a vestibule openness, that looks exactly like what I imagine a cell in the Vaults might be like: The walls and floor are concrete, and whatever color they might once have been painted, now faded to a discolored, overgrown gray green. A single rhizome is set high in the ceiling and barely delivers enough light to illuminate the tiny space. There is a stool in the corner, occupied by a guard.

A place I do not get- my mind misplaced- lost in time- this guard is

ordinary-sized- skinny and yet has some weight, even with a skin condition pockmarks and hair that reminds me of-of my pap, that I never met yet new in my mind.

He runs after me- I did not want him to- to see me like this… and all. As soon as Marcel, and I step through the door, the guard makes a small impulsive adjustment to his gun, drawing it closer toward his body, I thought I was going down I was high- and swiveling the barrel ever so slightly

in our direction. High not by choice she got me on the shit.

Marcel is beside me, not worried about my mental state. Suddenly, I feel very alert, in his hold.

‘Can’t be in here… they can be in my had.’

The guard says.

‘Restricted area’s- he knows I didn’t get it.’ For the first time since entering the Vaults, Marcel appears uncomfortable. The man- walks up, and fiddles nervously with his badge.

The guard gets to his feet and now mine also. The light is where I see it- amazingly, God may be showing me something… The man- he is not much taller than I am- he is certainly shorter than Marcel. Then of all the guards I have seen today, he frightens me the most it pointed at my had. Or am I in a dream.

There is something strange about his eyes yellow not brown to me, a flatness and hardness, which reminds me of a movie guy. I have never had a gun pointed at me before and staring

into the long black tunnel of its barrel makes me feel the black blocking out the light like an eclipse like I am going to pass out.

‘Oh, he’s here, all right. He’s always here, nowadays.’ The guard smiles humorlessly, and his fingers tap on the trigger. I want it- when he speaks his lips curl upward, revealing a mouth full of crooked yellow teeth.

Part: 2

Kellie- ‘What do you know about Raymon?’

‘I thought Raymon would be here.’ The room takes on the stillness, and charge of the air outside, and reminds… of this boy.

~*~

Karly-

‘My heart is POUNDING.’ Me of waiting for the thunder to crack. Marcel allows himself one small indication of nervousness: He curls and flexes his fingers against his thighs. I can almost see him thinking, trying to figure out what to say next. He must know that mentioning Raymon was a

bad decision- even, I heard the contempt and suspicion in the guard's voice as he pronounced the name.

After what seems like a long time-but is only a few seconds-the blanks, an official look sweeps down over his face again.

'We heard there was problem, that's all.'

The statement is sufficiently vague, and a decent assumption. Marcel twirls his security badge idly between two fingers. The guard flicks his eyes to it, and I can tell he relaxes.

~*~

Providentially, he does not try to look at it more closely. Marcel has only Level One security clearance in the labs, which means he barely has the right to visit the janitor's closet, much less parade around delimited areas, there or anywhere else in Pitt, as though he owns them.

~*~

Hanna- 'Took you long enough,' the guard says flatly. 'Raymon has been out for months. All the better for CID, I guess. It's not the kind of thing we

wanted to publicize.’ The CID is the Controlled Information Department or if you are cynical like Hanna, the Corrupt Idiots-

Department or the Censorship Implementation Department, and goosebumps prick up on my arms. Something went very wrong in Ward Six if the CID got involved.

‘You know how it is,’ Marcel says. He has recovered from his temporary slip up; the confidence and ease return to his voice.

‘Impossible to get a straight answer from anyone over there.’

Another vague statement, but the guard just nods.

‘You’re telling me.’ Then he shakes his head in my direction. ‘Who’s she?’

I can feel him staring at the unmarred skin on my neck, noticing that I have no procedural mark. Resembling many people, he unconsciously recoils-just a few inches, but enough so that the old feeling of humiliation, the feeling of being

somehow wrong, creeps over me. I turn my eyes to the ground.

‘She’s a nonentity,’ Marcel says, and even though I know he has to say it, it makes my chest ache dully. ‘I’m supposed to be showing her the Vaults, that’s all. An educational process if you know what I mean.’

I hold my breath, certain that at any second, he will boot us out, almost wishing he would. Plus, yet... Just beyond the guard’s stool is a single door made from heavy, thick metal, and protected by an electronic keypad. It

reminds me of the bank vault at Central Savings downtown. Through it I can just make out distant sounds-human sounds, I think, though it is hard to tell. My mother could be beyond that door.

She could be in there, Marcel was right. I do have to know. For the first time, I begin to know, fully, what Marcel told me last night: All this time, my mother might have been alive. While I was breathing; she was breathing too. While I was sleeping, she was sleeping elsewhere.

It is just like when I hold, release, and have the small one for the big O!

When I was awake thinking of her, she might have been thinking of me, too. It is overwhelming, both miraculous and fiercely tender. Marcel and the protector eye each other for a minute. Marcel continues spinning his badge around one finger, winding, and unwinding the chain. It puts the guard at ease.

Fuck! Fuck! Fuck! Shit- piss- my god, I as it comes out in that O!

‘I can’t let you back there,’ he says, but this time he sounds apologetic. He lowers his gun and sits down on the stool again. I exhale quickly; I have been holding my breath without meaning to. ‘You’re just doing your job,’ Marcel says, keeping his voice neutral. ‘So- you’re Raymon’s replacement?’

‘That’s right.’ The guard flicks his eyes to me and again I can feel his gaze lingering on my unmarked neck. I must stop myself from covering my skin with a hand. But then again, he must

decide that we are not going to be trouble because he looks back to Marcel and says, ‘Marcel. Got reassigned from Three in February - after the incident.’ Something about the way he says incident sends chills up my spine. ‘Tough breaks, huh?’ Marcel leans up against a wall, the picture of casualness.

Only I can detect the edge in his voice. He is stalling. He does not know what to do from here, or how to get us inside. Marcel shrugs. ‘Quieter

up here, that’s for sure. Nobody in or out. At least, almost nobody.’

Part: 3

He smiles again, showing off those awful teeth, but his eyes maintain their strange flatness, as though there is a curtain drawn over them. I wonder if this, for him, was a side effect of the cure, or whether he was always like that. He tilts his head back, peering at Marcel through narrowed eyes, and his resemblance to a snake grows even stronger. ‘So- how’d you hear about Raymon?’

‘If I die unexpectedly can everyone just do the right thing, and pretend, I was a way better person than- I am?’

Marcel keeps up the unconcerned act, smiling, twirling the badge. ‘Rumors floating here and there,’ he says, shrugging. ‘You know how it is.’ ‘I know how it is,’ Marcel says. ‘But the CID wasn’t too happy about it. Had us on lock for a few months. What exactly did you hear, anyway?’

‘When I'm home alone I eat tri-color pasta one color at a time…. and it feels great.’

Da ta da- like- a boy once said to me- ‘If your fake orgasms as well as you do who you are, I am in trouble.’

I can tell the question is an important one, test. Be careful, I think in Marcel’s direction, as though he might somehow hear me. Marcel hesitates for only a second before saying- ‘Heard he might have sympathies on the other side.’
Suddenly, it all makes sense: the fact

that Marcel said- ‘I have friends here,’ the fact that he has had access to six in the past. One of the guards must have been a well-wisher, an active part of the resistance. Marcel’s constant refrain plays in my head: There are more of us than you think.

Marcel decreases visibly. That was the right answer. He seems to decide that Marcel is trustworthy. We are in a tiny square, surrounded by the stained gray sides of the Vaults.

The grass here is amazingly lush, reaching to my knees. A single

tree twists upward to our left, and a bird is twittering in its branches. It is surprisingly nice out here, peaceful, and pretty- strange to be standing in the middle of a little garden while enclosed by the massive stone walls of the prison, like being at the exact center of a hurricane, and finding peace and silence in the middle of so much shrieking damage.

Part: 4

Marcel has moved several paces away. He is standing, head bowed, with his eyes on the ground. He

must have a sense too of the peacefulness here, the stillness that seems to hang in the air like a veil, covering the whole thing in softness, and rest. The sky above us is darker than it was when we first entered the Vaults: Against all the grayness and shadow, the grass stands intense and electric, as though it is lit up from inside. It will rain on any other, it just must. I have the sensation of the world holding its breath before a giant exhales, balancing, teetering, about to let go.

‘Here…’ Marcel’s voice rings out, surprisingly loud, and it startles me.

‘Right here.’ He points to a shard of rock sticking up crookedly from the ground.

‘That’s where my father is.’

The grass is broken up by dozens of these rocks, which appeared to be naturally, haphazardly arranged. Then I realize that they have been deliberately tamped down into the earth. Some of them are covered in fading black markings, mostly illegible,

although on one stone I recognize the word BLAIR and on another DIED.

He- he- I love to get tickle right above my little shaft… and feel some fuzz.

Part: 5

By the time, I returned to the guest room where their lovemaking session had taken place, he sounds asleep. They have not seen each other in five days. It only took thirty minutes to go from hello to total exhaustion for Teddy who was sleeping like a baby. I did not want to, but she had to take a

bath alone after Teddy left his calling card all over her legs, a little on her chin and breasts. She felt Teddy would not miss his feeling her up this one time. Looking in the bathroom mirror and only seeing herself without him with his hands all over her big ass, Annie saw a woman that had accomplished so much in a noticeably brief period. Yet with all she had accomplished, the greatest would-be capturing Ray. For without him, Annie knew she would not be the woman she is today.

My total concentration was on him. She wondered if this is what true love is. She knows he is her everything. She knows he loves her; He gave up his playboy lifestyle and a year-long trip around the world with all expenses paid just to be with her. He has gotten the best at that time a virgin could give, although Annie gave way more than she had, he stayed. It had to be love and not lust.

Annie’s only goal is to continually be the best at whatever he needed. Be it a cook or a warm mouth,

she vowed to be always the best. On this day, she knew she was better, so much better.

Kellie- previous times -

returned to the guest room and crawled up next to him. She always thought about how amazing it was that I could sleep in one spot without moving. She kissed his shoulder and stared at him as if she were seeing him for the first time. Going into the hostile territory was nothing compared to hunting down him. This gift that expanded her mind and body was released by him and she

loves it increasingly each day. What this gift did was take a naive young virgin whose breasts had never been touch before and who would break a Popsicle in three pieces to downing he is seven-plus inches with the greatest on ease.

She never tried gymnastics before because she was too stiff, yet she can keep her legs behind her head for as long as it takes, I complete his mission. Annie opens the curtains and looks toward the Heavens to give thanks for selecting Teddy for her.

Then she rolled teddy on his back and put his arm around her, kissed the head of his penis, and went to sleep a happy little girlie.

I realize as the purpose of the courtyard dawns on me. We are standing in the middle of a graveyard. Marcel is staring down at a large chunk of concrete, as flat as a tablet, pressed down into the earth in front of his feet.

All the writing is visible here, the words neatly printed in what looks like a black marker, their edges slightly blurred as though someone has been

continuously retracing them over an extended period. It says rest in peace.

I say… I want to reach out and slip my hand into Marcel's, but I do not think we are safe. A few windows are surrounding the courtyard on the ground floor, and even though they are thickly coated in grime, someone could walk by at any moment, lookout, and see us. 'Your father?'

Marcel nods, then shakes his shoulders, a sudden movement as though trying to jerk himself away from sleep. 'Yeah.'

‘He was here?’

One side of Marcel’s mouth quirks up into a smile, but the rest of his face remains stony. ‘For fourteen years.’ He draws a slow circle in the dirt with his toe, the first physical sign of discomfort or distraction he has given since we arrived. At that moment I am in awe of him: Since I have known him, he has done nothing but support me and give me comfort and listen to me, and all this time he has been carrying the weight of his secrets too.

~*~

I say to you now dad- ‘What happened…?’ I ask quietly. ‘I mean, what did he…?’ I trail off. I do not want to push the issue. It's funny that way, you can get used, To the tears and the pain, What a child will believe you never loved me, It's funny that way, you can get used, To the tears and the pain, What a child will believe, You never loved me, You can't hurt me now, I got away from you, I never thought I would, you can't make me cry, you once had the power, I never felt so-o good about myself, seems like yesterday, I lay down next to your boots and I prayed

for your anger to end, Oh Father I have sinned; Oh Father you never wanted to live that way you never wanted to hurt me, why am I running away, maybe someday, when I look back I'll be able to say, you didn't mean to be cruel Somebody hurt you too.

~*~

Marcel glances at me quickly and looks away. ‘What did he do?’ He speaks.

The hardness has returned to his voice. ‘I- don’t know. What all the people who end up in Ward Six do. He

thought for himself. Stood up for what he believed in.

Refused to give in…'

'Ward Six?'

Marcel avoids my eyes carefully. 'The dead ward,' he says quietly. 'For political prisoners, mostly. They are kept in solitary confinement. Besides, no one ever gets released.'

He gestures around him, to the other shards of stone poking up through the grass, dozens of makeshift graves. 'Ever,' he repeats, and I think

of the sign on the door: LIFERS, HA-HA.

‘I’m so sorry, Marcel.’ I would give anything to touch him, but the best I can do is an inch closer to him so that our skin is separated by only a few inches.

He looks at me then, shooting me a sad smile. ‘He and my mom were only sixteen when they met. Can you believe that? She was only eighteen when she had me.’

Part: 6

He drops into a squat and traces his father's name with his thumb. I suddenly understand that the reason he comes here so often is to continue darkening the letters as they fade, to keep some record of his father. I think for my mom it was easier to believe he had died. She didn't want to think of him rotting in this place.'

'They wanted to run away together, but he was caught before they could finalize a plan. I never knew he had been taken into custody.

I just thought he was dead. My mom thought it would be better for me, and nobody in the Wilds knew enough to correct her.

I feel sick. The walls appear to be pressing closer to us, growing taller and narrower, too- so the sky feels increasingly remote, an ever-diminishing point. We will never get out, I think, and then take a deep breath, trying to stay calm.

He continues looping a finger over the letters, back and forth. ‘My aunt and uncle told me the truth when I

turned fifteen. They wanted me to know. I came here to meet him, but-'

I see- Marcel shudder, a sudden stiffening movement of his shoulders and back.

'Anyway, it was too late. He was dead, had been dead for a few months, and buried here, where his remains wouldn't contaminate anything.'

Marcel straightens up. 'Ready?' he asks me, for the second time this morning. I nod, even though I am not sure that I am. He allows himself the

brief flicker of a smile, and I see, for a second, a bit of warmth spark up in his eyes. Then he is all business again.

I take one last look at the tombstone before we go in. I try to think of prayer or something appropriate to say, but nothing comes to me. The lessons of the scientists are not clear about what happens when you die: You dissipate into the heavenly matter that is God, and get absorbed by him, although they also tell us that the cured go to heaven and live forever in perfect harmony and order.

‘Your name.’ I spin around to face Marcel. He has already moved past me, headed back for the door. ‘Marcel.’

~*~

He gives an almost imperceptible shake of his head. ‘Assigned to me,’ he says. For a moment Marcel’s hand pauses on the gun, his fingers once again dancing the trigger. ‘Sure,’ he says, keeping his eyes on

Marcel, as though I am not even there. ‘You must have heard about it.’

Marcel shrugs. ‘A little of this, a little of that. Nothing confirmed.’ Marcel laughs. It is a terrible sound. It reminds me of the time I saw two seagulls fighting in midair over a scrap of food, screeching as they tumbled toward the ocean. ‘Oh, it’s confirmed,’ he says.

‘Happened back in February.

We got the alarm from Raymon. ’Course if he was in on it, she

might have had a lead time of six, seven hours.’

Part: 7

17th November- 2014-

‘The ‘50 Shades of Grey’ man looks just like ‘Love Actually’ kid…? I feel less ~turned on~ and more like... I should call child services...’

Kalliez14@twtter.com

Kelliez14@twtter.com < look at that shit there… I can have anything can I?

Cupcakes- ‘If the frosting has cream cheese it counts as breakfast, right?’

Through the walls, we can hear low moaning, a constant vibration. It is worse, somehow, than the screeches, and screams of earlier: This is the sound people make when they have long ago given up hope that anyone is listening, a reflexive sound, meant just to fill the time and space and the darkness.

‘Cooking for one suck, because no matter how I portion it; I seem to end up wasting food. Also, loneliness…’

I am going to be sick. If Marcel is correct, my mother is here, behind one of these terrible doors-so close that if I could rearrange the particles and make the stone melt away, I might put my hand out, and touch her. Closer than I ever thought I would be to her again.

As we walk, I can hear the barrel of his gun, slapping against his thigh. I am worried I might faint, and I

want to reach out, and steady myself against the walls, but they are coated with fungus and moisture. On either side of us, bolted metal cell doors appear at intervals, each outfitted with a single grimy window the size of a dinner plate.

‘Being told ‘I know you can do this’ weirdly makes me not want to try…

‘You CAN'T do this’ has the same effect. Okay, yes, I might just be lazy.’

I am filled with competing thoughts and desires: My mother cannot be here; I would rather she was dead; I want to see her alive. And filled, too, with that other word, pressing itself underneath all my other thoughts: leakage, seepage, escape. A possibility too fantastic to contemplate. If my mother had been the one to break out, I would have known. She would have come for me. Ward Six consists of just one long hallway.

'Here's your boy Raymon if you want to say hello.' Then he laughs

again, that awful crackling sound. I think about what he said when we first entered the vestibule: He is always here, nowadays.

Ahead of us, Marcel does not respond, but I see him shudder. Marcel nudges me sharply in the back with the barrel of his gun. ‘So, what do you think?’

As far as I can tell, there are about forty doors, forty separate cells.

‘This is it…’

Marcel says. ‘The grand tour.’ He pounds on one of the very first doors.

~*~

Random- like- ‘I get the same feeling at the dentist that I get when a cop car is behind me; I haven't done anything wrong, but I feel incredibly guilty.’

When he says the word, the walls seem to collapse around me. I take a quick step backward, bumping up against a wall. It could be her, I think, and for one horrible, guilty

second, I am disappointed. Then I remind myself that she might not be here at all and in any case, it could have been anyone who escaped, any female sympathizer or agitator.

Still, the dizziness does not subside. I am filled with anxiety and fear and a desperate craving, all at once.

‘What’s wrong with her?’ Marcel asks. His voice sounds distant.

‘Air,’ I manage to force out. ‘It’s the air in here.’

Hate is not the most dangerous thing, he had said. Indifference is.

Marcel starts talking. His voice is low and still casual, but there is an undertone of force to it: the vocal sound street peddlers lapse into when they are trying to get you to buy a carton of bruised berries or a broken toy. It is okay, I will give you a deal, no problem, trust me.

‘Listen, just let us in for a minute. That is all it will take: a minute. Marcel laughs again, that unpleasant crackling sound. ‘You think it’s bad out

here,’ he says. ‘It's paradise compared to the cells.’ He takes pleasure in this, and it reminds me of a debate I had a few weeks ago with Marcel when he was arguing against the usefulness of the cure. I said- that without love, there could also be no hate: without hate, no violence. You can tell she is already scared out of her thoughts. I had to come out here for this, a day off and everything, I was going to go to the pier, try out some fishing.

The point is if I bring her home and she is not straightened out - well,

you know, chances are I will just have to haul out here again. And I only have a couple of days off, and summer's almost over-'

'Why all the trouble?' Marcel says, jerking his head in my direction.

'If she's causing problems, there's an easy to fix her up.' It is a bold lie. Marcel could easily ask to see my ID card, and then Marcel and I are screwed. I am not sure what the punishment would be for infiltrating the Vaults under pretenses, but it cannot be good. Marcel smiles tightly. 'Her

father’s Steven, a commissioner at the labs.

He does not want to do an early procedure, no trouble, no violence, or mess. Looks bad, you know.’

~*~

Marcel appears interested in me for the first time. He looks me up and down like I am a grapefruit he is evaluating in the supermarket for mellowness, and for a moment he does not say anything.

Then, finally, he stands,
slipping the gun onto his shoulder.
‘Come on,’ he says. ‘Seven minutes.’

‘Let us go,’ he says,
manufacture his vocal sound crotchety,
like my little fit has left him impatient.
Nevertheless, his touch is gentle, and
his hand warm and reassuring. As he is
fiddling with the keypad, which
requires both that he type code, and
scan his hand on fingerprint- matching
screen, Marcel reaches out and takes
my elbow.

Part: 8

Ray's idea of bathing her is to wash her ass and feel her up repeatedly. But one thing is for sure, he cleans her as well. After bathing herself Annie sat on the bed and reflected on today’s events. It is two forty-five and she flew out of Pitt. At nine this morning. She became Less than this nice naive barely boob-ed adult, unassuming, sexless woman. Now she is a killing sex machine on me. How could the taste of he come do this to her?

And she did…

I wish he… could keep it there, but after only a second, he lets me go again. I can read a plea, loud and clear, in his eyes: Be strong. We are there. Be strong for just a little while longer. The locks on the door release with a click.

Marcel goes first, then me, then Marcel.

Marcel leans his shoulder against it, straining, and it slides open just enough for us to squeeze by into the hallway beyond.

But the smell is what hits me: a horrible, rotting, festering stink, like

the Dumpsters by the harbor, the place where all the fish intestines get discarded, on the hottest day. The passage is so narrow we must go single file, and it is even darker than the rest of the Vaults.

~*~

I stood looking out at the cattle as it grazed in the far-field. It was good to be home, but he could not get his head on straight. That is when he saw the lone horse out in the field. Anger surged in him as he urged his horse into a run across the large expanse of

pasture. If one of those longhorn cattle came near enough to gore that Stallion, they would be out a lot of money. His mind kept going over who oversaw the horses this morning when he headed out. Then he remembered, it was Maggie. Shaking his head as he easily jumped the fence and gained on the skittish Stallion. The horse realized he was in the wrong place. Once- he neared the horse he saw the dangling rope. Grinding his teeth and jumping off his horse he grabbed the rope and reached up to tie it to the horn on his saddle. He stepped up into the saddle

and started for the barn. He would have her hide for this. She knew how to tie a proper knot. Where was that girl's mind?

When he neared the barn, he saw his little sister brushing her mare. She looked up and their eyes locked. Hers was the first to dart away. She knew instantly that he was angry. The horse he was leaning toward her was one of the prize Stallions that her father had paid a lot of money for. Stepping around the back of her horse, she gazed over the horses back timidly,

dreading his wrath. Maybe if she put the horse between them, it would be better, but the anger in his eyes was growing. Finally, she walked out of the stall and reached up for the rope that he handed her.

'Maggie…'

What were you thinking? Do you have any idea where this horse was when I found him?' Not giving her time to respond, he continued with a loud, booming voice full of anger. 'He was out in the pasture with the longhorn cattle. What if one of those bulls

decided to tear open this Stallion? How would he get- loose? You know how to tie a knot.' He slowly dismounted his horse and stood in front of his sister. Grabbing the rope, he tied it in a proper knot and slipped it over the hook on the side of the stall.

'I'm sorry Ridge. I do not know how he got loose. I swear I got married tightly.' She edged away from him as he continued to stare at her.

He reached up and pulled his cowboy hat off to wipe the sweat from his forehead. How could he stay mad at

her? With a quick motion, he grabbed her and pulled her into his embrace. ‘Just be glad it was me that found him and not dad. He’d have you cleaning out stalls with your hands.’ He reached up and pulled her ponytail.

She made a face just thinking about that punishment. ‘Thanks, Ridge, for not ratting on me this time but I’ll do better. I was distracted by the new horse and all.’ Looking over her shoulder at her new mare she smiled. ‘But you’ve got to admit she’s worth the distraction.’

He laughed and pushed her gently back toward her mare. ‘Well, distraction or not, don’t let it happen again or I’ll have you using your toothbrush on the bits.’

As she giggled, he rolled his eyes and headed over to brush his horse down, his heart-melting slightly at the sound of her giggle. That was one of the many things he had missed while in Iraq.

His mind went back to that bad place that haunted his dreams and woke him in a cold sweat every night.

The sand ate into his feet as he stood with his back against the jeep. He held his gun against his body in complete silence, waiting on the enemy to move closer. The cries from his injured fellow soldiers filled the air, causing his heart to pound loud in his ears.

Suddenly-

A loud explosion rattled the air and then the next thing he knew was seeing a hospital room ceiling. Then he was brought back to the stable when he felt a slight shiver run up his spine.

Turning he realized a female was in the stables that he did not know.

Maggie was talking with her as he walked up. The woman was stunning in her jeans and t-shirt, as she stood talking about the new mare. Both women looked up when he stopped beside Maggie.

‘Ridge have you met the new vet yet?’ She asked in a sweet telling voice. He looked down at her with a warning in his eyes, letting her know he was aware of the slight hint in her voice.

The woman stepped forward and extended her hand. ‘I’m glad to finally meet the town’s hero, Ridge Cauthen. Thank you for all you’ve done for this country.’ She said in an exhale as she took in his gorgeous face and lean, muscular body.

He took her hand sheepishly as he grinned down at her. ‘I’m just a normal man doing what he had to do.’

Suddenly- embarrassed, she said, ‘I’m sorry, I didn’t say my name, it’s Mallory Talon.’

‘Good to meet you, Mallory.’ He tipped his hat and spun on his booted heel, heading back out of the stable. One thing he had learned while at war was when that tingle went down your spine, you needed to take cover and it was time to take cover.

It was raining we ran to the barn and had hot sex and kissing. I was up early kidding him, and she did not want to drain him before his golf game with Timmy.

She brought him to the brink but did not drain his tank is the way he

put it. It was eight o’clock and as he was preparing to meet Timmy for their nine o’clock tee time, I was still kidding him about what he misses when he plays golf. She told him to shoot that little white ball in that hole because you did not shoot anything in this hole.

He laughed and said I can still cancel. I said do not do that, that golf course may close, but I stay open. She kissed him passionately, grab his manhood, and told him to go beat Timmy and if he won, she would give him a trophy. He waved bye and

shouted I have had a trophy since I met you. Annie kissed him and said that is good because I am going to drain you right now.

~*~

Even Marcel curses and coughs, covering his nose with his hand.

Behind me, I can imagine Marcel grinning. ‘Ward Six has its dancing special perfume,’ he says.

It is all good! Remember that!

‘Your real name is Marcel,’ I say, and he nods. This is what people are always talking about when they talk about God: this feeling, of being held and unspoken and protected. Feeling this way seems about as close to saying a prayer as you could get, so I follow Marcel back inside, holding my breath as we again encounter that awful stink. He has a secret name, just like me. We stand there for one more moment, looking at each other, and in that instant, I feel our connection so strongly it is as though it achieves physical existence, becomes a hand all

around us, cupping us together, protecting us.

I follow Marcel down a series of serpentine hallways. The sensation of stillness and peace I had in the courtyard is replaced almost immediately by fear so sharp it is like a blade going straight into the core of me, driving down and deep until I can hardly breathe or keep going. At points, the wailing grows louder, to a fever pitch, and I must cover my ears; then it ebbs away again. Once we pass a man wearing a long white lab coat, stained

with what looks like blood; he is leading a patient on a leash.

Neither one looks at us as we pass. We make so many twists and turns I am beginning to wonder if Marcel is lost, especially as the hallways grow dirtier, and the lights above us become fewer in number so that eventually we are walking through murk and obscurity, with a single functioning bulb to light up twenty feet of the blackened stone corridor. At intervals various glowing neon signs appear in the darkness, as though they

are rising out of the air itself: WARD ONE, WARD TWO, WARD THREE, WARD FOUR. Marcel keeps going, though, and when we pass the hallway that leads to Ward Five, I call out to him, convinced he has gotten confused or lost his way.

Part: 9

‘Marcel,’ I say, but even as I say the word it strangles me because just then we come up to a heavy set of double doors marked with a small sign, barely illuminated, so faint I can hardly

read it. And yet it seems to burn as brightly as a thousand suns.

He strokes the barrel of his gun-which has been resting casually between his knees- as though it is a pet.

‘That’s right.

This is the first time I have heard anyone in an official capacity acknowledge the existence of the people in the Wilds, and I sucked in a sharp breath. I know it must be painful for Marcel to stand there, talking dismissively about a friend who has

been caught for being a sympathizer. The punishment must have been swift and severe, especially since he was on the government payroll. He was hanged, shot, or electrocuted or thrown into one of the cells to rot- if the courts were merciful and decided against a verdict of death by torture. If he even had a trial. Came as a total shock to me. ’Course I hardly knew him- saw him sometimes in the break room, once or twice in the shitter, that’s about it.

Kept to himself, mostly. It makes sense. Must have been getting chatty with the Invalids.'

Amazingly, Marcel's voice does not falter. 'What was the tip-off?' Marcel keeps massaging his gun, and something about the motion-gentle, like he is willing it to live- makes me feel sick. 'No tip-off, exactly.' He sweeps his hair off his face, revealing a splotchy red forehead, shiny with sweat. It is much hotter here than it was in the other wards. The air must get trapped in these walls, rotting, and festering

like everything else in this place. ‘It figures he must have known something about the escape. He oversaw cell inspections. And the tunnel didn’t just sprout up overnight.’

‘The escape?’ The words fly out of my mouth before I can help it. My heart starts jolting painfully in my chest.

Nobody has ever escaped the Crypts, not ever.

‘You must have heard about it.’

Marcel shrugs. ‘A little of this, a little of that. Nothing confirmed.’

Marcel laughs. It is a terrible sound. It reminds me of the time I saw two seagulls fighting in midair over a scrap of food, screeching as they tumbled toward the ocean. ‘Oh, it’s confirmed,’ For a moment Marcel’s hand pauses on the gun, his fingers once again dancing the trigger.

‘Sure,’ he says, keeping his eyes on Marcel, as though I am not even there. He speaks. ‘Happened back in February. We got the alarm from

Raymon. ’Course if he was in on it, she might have had a lead time of six, seven hours.’

When he says the word, the walls seem to collapse around me. Then I remind myself that she might not be here at all and in any case, it could have been anyone who escaped, any female sympathizer or agitator. Still, the dizziness does not subside. I take a quick step backward, bumping up against a wall. It could be her, I think, and for one horrible, guilty second, I am disappointed.

~*~

Then- I only have a couple of days off, and summer's almost over-.'

It is okay, I will give you a deal, no problem, trust me.

'Listen, just let us in for a minute. That is all it will take: a minute. You can tell she is already scared out of her mind. I had to come out here for this, a day off and everything, I was going to go to the pier, try out some fishing.

The point is if I bring her home and she is not straightened out - well, you know, chances are I will just have to haul out here again.

I am filled with anxiety and fear and a desperate craving, all at once.

‘What’s wrong with her?’ Marcel asks.

His voice sounds distant.

‘Air,’ I manage to force out. ‘It’s the air in here.’

Marcel laughs again, that unpleasant crackling sound. ‘You think it’s bad out here,’ he says. ‘It's paradise compared to the cells.’ He takes pleasure in this, and it prompts me of a debate I had a few weeks ago with Marcel when he was arguing against the usefulness of the cure. I said that without love, there could also be no hate: without hate, no violence. Hate is not the most dangerous thing, he had said. Indifference is.

Marcel starts talking. His voice is low, and still casual, but there is an

undertone of force to it: the kind of voice street peddlers lapse into when they are trying to get you to buy a carton of bruised berries or a broken toy.

‘Why all the trouble?’ Marcel says, jerking his head in my direction. ‘If she’s causing problems, there’s an effortless way to fix her up.’ Marcel smiles tightly.

‘Her father’s Steven, a commissioner at the labs.

He does not want to do an early procedure, no trouble, no violence, or mess.

Looks bad, you know.’

It is a bold lie. Marcel could easily ask to see my ID card, and then Marcel and I are screwed. I am not sure what the punishment would be for infiltrating the Vaults under pretenses, but it cannot be good.

Behind me, I can imagine Marcel grinning. ‘Ward Six has its special perfume,’ he says- As we walk, I can hear the barrel of his gun, slapping

against his thigh. I am worried I might faint, and I want to reach out and steady myself against the walls, but they are coated with fungus and moisture. On either side of us, bolted metal cell doors appear at intervals, each outfitted with a single grimy window the size of a dinner plate.

Through the walls, we can hear low moaning, a constant vibration. It is worse, somehow, than the screeches, and screams of earlier: This is the sound people make when they have long ago given up hope that anyone is

listening, a reflexive sound, meant just to fill the time and space and the dimness.

I am going to be sick.

Then filled, too, with that other word, pressing itself beneath all my other thoughts: escape, leakage, escape. An occasion too fantastic to contemplate. If my mother had been the one to break out, I would have known.

She would have come for me.

If Marcel is correct, my mother is here, behind one of these terrible doors-so close that if I could rearrange the particles and make the stone melt away, I might put my hand out and touch her. Closer than I ever thought I would be to her again.

I am filled with competing thoughts and desires: My mother cannot be here; I would rather she was dead; I want to see her alive. Ward Six consists of just one long hallway. As far as I can tell, there are about forty doors, forty separate cells.

‘This is it,’ Marcel says. ‘The grand tour.’ He pounds on one of the very first doors. ‘Here’s your boy Raymon if you want to say hello.’ Then he laughs again, that awful crackling sound.

I think about what he said when we first entered the vestibule: He is always here, nowadays. Ahead of us, Marcel does not respond, but I see him shudder.

Marcel nudges me sharply in the back with the barrel of his gun. ‘So, what do you think?’

‘Awful,’ I croak out. My throat feels like it has been encircled with barbed wire. Marcel seems pleased. ‘Better to listen and do as you’re tell,’ he says.

‘No use ending up like this guy.’

We have paused in front of one of the cells. Marcel nods toward the tiny window, and I take a hesitant step forward, pressing my face up against the glass. It is so grimy it is opaque, but if I squint, I can just make out a few shapes in the obscurity of the cell: a

single bed with a flimsy, dirty mattress; a toilet; a bucket that looks like it might be the human equivalent of a dog's water bowl. At first, there is a pile of old rags in the corner too, until- I realize that this thing is the 'guy' Marcel was pointing out: a filthy, crouching heap of skin and bones and crazy, tangled hair. He is motionless, and his skin is so dirty it blends in with the gray of the stone walls behind him. If it were not for his eyes, rolling continuously back and forth as though he is checking the air for insects, you would never know he was alive. You

would never even know he was human. The thought flashes again: I would rather she be dead. Not in this place.

Anywhere but here.

‘What?’ I speak.

For a moment he does not answer. He is staring at something; I cannot see some door farther down the hall.

Marcel has continued down the hall, and I hear him draw in his breath sharply. I look up. He is standing

perfectly still, and the appearance on his face makes me afraid.

Then he turns to me abruptly, a quick, convulsive shake.

‘Don’t,’ he says, his voice a croak, and the fear surges, overwhelms me.

‘What is it?’ I ask you again. I start down the hall toward him. It seems, suddenly, that he is extremely far away, and when Marcel speaks up behind me, his voice too sounds distant.

‘That’s where she was,’ he is saying. ‘Number one-eighteen. Admin has not coughed up the dough to get the walls patched, yet, so, for now, we are just leaving it as is. Not a lot of money around here for improvements-’

Marcel is watching me. All his control and confidence has vanished.

Marcel holds up his hand like he is thinking of blocking my progress. Our eyes meet for just a second and something flashes between us- a warning, or an apology, maybe-and

then I am pushing beyond him into cell 117.

His eyes are blazing with anger, or pain; his mouth is twisted into a grimace. My head feels full of noise.

In every way it is identical to the cells I have glimpsed through the tiny hallway windows: a rough cement floor; a rust-stained toilet, and a bucket full of water, in which several cockroaches are revolving slowly; a tiny iron bed with a paper-thin mattress, which someone has dragged into the very center of the room.

But the walls.

‘Stray bobby pins; you are my Everest.’

#- Hashtag- (Organizing Day)

Looped huge and scratched, just barely, in the corners; inscribed in the graceful script and solid block lettering; chipped, scratched, picked away, as though the walls are slowly melting into poetry.

And on the ground, lying curled up against one wall is a dull silver chain with a charm still attached to it: a ruby-

encrusted dagger whose blade has been worn down to a small nub.

The walls are covered- crammed- with writing. Nope- Not writing. They are covered with a single four-letter word that has been inscribed over and over on every available surface.

Love.

Part: 10

Sleepy- sleepy- sleepy- ‘How long can you stay still before you develop bedsores?’ Lazy boy…!

#- Hashtag:

(MotivationMonday)

DADDY- My father’s charm. My mother’s necklace. My mother. All this time, during every long second of my life when I believed her dead, she was here: scratching, burrowing, chipping away, encased in the stone walls like a long-buried secret.

You know- ‘For someone with such an intense need to be liked you- you would think I would have figured out how to be less of an asshole.’

I feel, suddenly, as though I am back in my dream, standing on a cliff as the solid ground disintegrates underneath me, transforms into the sand in an hourglass, running away under my feet. I feel the way I do at that moment when I realize that all the ground has vanished, and I am standing on a bare blade of air, ready to drop.

‘It’s terrible, you, see? Look at what the disease did to her. Who knows how many hours she spent scrabbling along these walls like a rat?’

Tv time- ‘Does the food network use music recycled from 80's porn, or do I want to fuck that soufflé?’ Therefore, I do eat- God- shit and piss! ‘I suspect that low-carb diets work not because they are healthier, but because without carbs I simply lose the will to eat.’

~*~

Marcel and Marcel are standing behind me. Marcel’s words seem to be muffled by a layer of cloth. I take a step forward into the cell, suddenly fixated on a shaft of light,

extending like a long golden finger from a space in the wall that has been chipped clear away.

The clouds must have begun to break apart outside: Through the hole, on the other side of the stone fortress, I see the flashing blue of the 3 Rivers, and leaves shifting and tumbling over one another, a snow slip of green and sun and the perfume of wild, growing things. The Boondocks…

As he is fiddling with the keypad, which requires both that he type code and scan his hand on

fingerprint-matching screen, Marcel reaches out and takes my elbow. ‘Let us go,’ he says, making his voice gruff like my little fit has left him impatient.

Nevertheless, then his touch is moderate, and his hand warm and reassuring. I wish he could keep it there, but after only a second, he lets me go again. I can read a plea, loud and clear, in his eyes: Be strong.

We are there. Be strong for just a little while longer. Marcel appears interested in me for the first time.

He looks me up and down like I am a grapefruit he is evaluating in the supermarket for ripeness, and for a moment he does not say anything. Then, finally, he stands, slipping the gun onto his shoulder. ‘Come on,’ he says. ‘Five minutes.’ The locks on the door release with a click. Marcel leans his shoulder against it, straining, and it slides open just enough for us to squeeze by into the hallway beyond.

Marcel goes first, then me, then Marcel. The passage is so narrow

we must go single file, and it is even darker than the rest of the Vaults.

But the smell is what hits me: a horrible, rotting, festering stink, like the Dumpsters by the harbor, the place where all the fish intestines get discarded, on the hottest day. Even Marcel curses and coughs, covering his nose with his hand.

So many hours, so many days, looping those same four letters over and over: that strange and terrifying word, the word that confined her here for over ten years.

~*~

In addition to the word that helped her escape. In the lower half of one wall, she has traced the word so many times in such enormous script- LOVE, each letter the size of a child- and gouged so deeply into the stone that the oh has formed a tunnel, and she has gotten out. Food for the body, milk for your bones, ice for the bleeding, a belly of stones.

-A folklore consecration…

Even after the iron gates clang shut behind us and the Vaults recedes

in the distance, the feeling of being penned in on all sides does not go away. There is still a terrible, squeezing pressure in my chest, and I must struggle to suck in full breaths.

An ancient prison bus with a wheezing motor carries us away from the border to Deering. From there Marcel and I walk back toward the center of Pittsburgh, staying on opposite sides of the sidewalk. Every couple of feet he swivels his head to look at me, opening, and closing his mouth, like he is pronouncing a series

of inaudible words. I know he is worried about me, and waiting for me to break down, but I cannot bring myself to meet his eyes or speak to him. I keep my eyes locked straight ahead of me, keep my feet cycling forward. Other than the terrible pain in my chest and stomach, my body feels numb.

I cannot feel the ground underneath me or the wind zipping through the trees, skating past my face; cannot feel the warmth of the sun, which has, against all odds, broken through the terrible black clouds,

lighting the world up a strange greenish color, as though everything is submerged in water.

When I was little and my mother died -when I thought she had died- I remember going out for my first-ever run and getting hopelessly lost at the end of Congress, a street I had been playing on my whole life. I turned a corner and found myself in front of the Bubble and Soap Cleaners and had been suddenly unable to remember where I was, and whether the home was to the left or the right.

Nothing looked the same.

Everything looked like a painted replica of itself, fragile and distorted, like I was caught in a funhouse hall of mirrors, with a face does not mine looking back at me, luminous my regular world back to me, I feel now, once again; yes- lost, found, and lost again, all at once this was happing or so it seems to me, I wonder if it was to them. Also- now I know somewhere in this world, in the wildness on the other side of the fence, my mother is alive and breathing I see

her angel body in- front of me all the time, do you see her? Me- sweating, moving, and thinking frantically. I spectacle if she is thinking about me… plus the pain shoots deeper, in my mind, and hurting young small body it makes me- lose my breath completely, that I did not know I was holding in, so I must rest… you see me sitting done in the grass, then I got up started walking and double up, one hand on my stomach.

Still- there are people on the streets, that I and you can see. This

including a man that I take for a watchdog right away. Even now just before noon, he has a bullhorn swinging from his neck, besides a wooden baton strapped to one thigh.

I must fight my way through the pain, that I have that they gave to me. It is radiating through my whole body, like heartburn in the night after eating far too much. Now, throbbing up into my head and shank with tremors down to my legs and toes. ‘I think so,’ I make a harsh gasp out…!

~*~

‘Backstreet- on your left- go…’

I uncurl up as much as I can- an adequate amount of, at least, to hobble into the backstreet in the middle of two larger buildings that a black glass and like way far up there, one has a point on it.

Halfway down the backstreet there are a few metal dumpsters, arranged parallel to one another, bustling with flies. The smell is disgusting, like being back in the Vaults, on the other hand, I sink between them anyway, appreciative for

the concealment and the chance to be seated. As soon as I am resting, the throbbing hits and ticks in my head subside some, yet not all. I slope my head back against the brick wall there, and feel the world swaying some to my eyes, and looking forward and to the sides, a ship cut loosens for now mooring.

Marcel- he must have seen him too… there… do you? He stays a couple of feet away from me, skims through the street, trying to appear undisturbed, or unworried. Then again,

he murmurs in my direction, ‘Can you move- Jezz?’ The voices said.

Part: 11

Marcel joins me a few moments later, squatting in front of me, brushing the hair away from my face. It is the first time he has been able to touch me all day. ‘I’m sorry, Liv,’ he says, and I know he means it when he said something like this. ‘I thought you’d want to know.’ Not…?

Ray aka Raymond…

~*~

She- I see her face too-

‘Twelve years,’ I say basically and so simply. ‘I thought she was dead for twelve years.’ For a while, we stay there in stillness. I am lost now in the past… confused me too.

~*~

Marcel rubs circles on my shoulders, arms then lay me down and feel my knees- anywhere he can reach alike sound hole he is despairing to maintain bodily contact with me. I wish I could close my eyes, and be blown into dust, and have nothing but

nothingness, not feeling all my thoughts run like a train running down an upcoming dead-end track. I understand something clearly at last run-in flickers like being in the car looking out the window all the same as the girl in the first story.

Diffuse like fuzz or bully lint of mine- like just drifting off on the wind. All the same, his hands keep pulling me back, yes back- into the backstreet, dark cold and damp, it is fucking Pittsburgh, what do you expect, and a world that has suddenly stopped

making sense will not be right. She is out there somewhere, breathing, thirsty, eating, walking, swimming. Impossible like how and now, to contemplate going on with my life… It is just fucking impossible to imagine sleeping and lacing up my shoes for a run and helping.

~*~

(Home)

I see- my new mom so bitch 2, and she is loading up all the dishes, and even lying in the house with some new boyfriend, when I know that she exists

on in his mind as fucking perfect: that she is out there, orbiting as far from me as a distant constellation, like stars in the milky ways is not far enough.

Why?

Tell me why I did not just walk- yet she comes for me?

‘Your mother loved you.

She loved her dicks more.

Do you recognize that? She loved you.

Sure… I thought to myself. She still loves you. She desired you to be not hurtful.'

Yet you want to be that way to her.

On the other hand- then again- I do not know whom to pray to.

All at once, I cannot remember any words said to me, and I cannot think of anything but being in the church not want to be there; like- when I was little and watching, I recall the sun brightness up my day, and then fade away beyond the stained- glass

windows, loved it- like just watching all that light die, like my faith hope- see if it would come back- ha. What do you think I have?

I have truly nothing, but dull panes of colored glass, raying out for me. All metallic thin and not- dunce insubstantial- looking. The thought flashes as speedily and clearly as an electrical surge passing like my clit in the light night, bringing the pain searing back. I squeezed my eyes shut, drop my head forward, pray for it to pass, and give the finger to the father,

and walk out, I know he fucked Jenny and not in the ass.

Watching it tumble to the ground, and it reminds me of my mother 1, and those strange and terrifying walls and the tears come faster back then. I swore to the man up there I would never cry for anyone like that ever- never.

It is too late, I feel dicked in the ass once more, and it gets old and sore. Tears are blurring my vision, I kick a small boy in the face, dumping holy water in a teen girl’s eyes, that

was pointing at me saying shit that I did with a girl. I turn away from him and start fragmenting lines at the wall and running a fingernail down the bench. Over her name… she was my friend, not a lover. A minuscule portion of brick crumbles away.

The girl- Hanna- ‘If you cared about me, you would take me away,’ I say. ‘If you cared about me at all you would go right now.’

His place I go-

‘I do care about you,’ Ray says. ‘You don’t.’ Now I know I am being

juvenile, but I cannot help it. ‘She didn’t either… she didn’t care at all. Like bitch 1, all the same.’

‘That’s not true.’ He yelled out-running after. I said- ‘Why didn’t she come for me, then?’ I am still turning away from him, pressing the palm against his room wall, hard; feeling like it, too, might collapse at any second.

(My thoughts)

‘Where is she now? Fucking shit- I should like my sister, yet that is what, and everyone wants, isn’t it? she said moody and pissed off at the world.

Why didn’t she come looking for me then is she the one?’

Ray said- You know why, he says, more firmly.

‘You know what would have happened if she was caught again- if she was caught with you. It would have meant death for both of you.’

I know he is right, but that does not make it any better. I keep going stubbornly, unable to stop myself from the shit I feel. ‘It’s not that… it’s not that- she doesn’t care, and you don’t care. Nobody ever cares… About

me- about- shit and about- anything or anyone.’ I draw my forearm across my face moving into the handhold of my cheeks, swiping at my nose getting the snot.

~*~

Ray puts a hand on each of my elbows and guides me around to face him. When I refuse to meet his eyes yet feel dejected, he tilts my chin upward, forcing me to look, stop looking down, let me see those eyes…they shin up at him- wet glass nice- yet shy.

~*~

‘Maggie- Liv,’ he repeats, the first time… since we met that he has ever used my full name. You do not need to know that it sucks ass. Heat rushes through me like never- ever before it was like a barning fart from my ass hole. For the first time in my life, I am not afraid of the words they all say.

Something yawns open inside of me, to stretch out like a girl on her bed, like a pussy trying to soak up the sun, into the bargain I am desperate for him to say it again.

Like- her voice is endlessly soft. Her eyes are warm and flecked with light, like a dream of her in a perfect way- the color of the sun melting like butter through the trees on a warm autumn evening.

~*~

Ray- That's when it happens, the crying and crap, standing there is- sandwiched between two disgusting dumpsters in some crappy lane with the whole world crumbling, down around me, and hearing Kellie say those words, all the fear I have carried with me since

myself scholarly to sit, stand, breathe- since I was told that at the very heart of me was something wrong, something rotten and diseased, something to be suppressed- since I was told that I was always just a heartbeat away from being damaged- all of it vanishes at once.

(More judgment's)

That thing-the heart of hearts of me, the core of my core -stretches and unfurls even further, soaring like a flag: making me feel stronger than I ever have before. His fingers skate the

edge of my chin, dance briefly over my lips. ‘You should know that like- you have to know that.’

‘As well as I love you too.’

Nevaeh- I thought back on it I think the band teacher, though I would have picked up a little girl, to my lips and played her like a flute; she horizontal like… he would look at me and- ‘I say that what I thought you would do you’re that stupid to- mix this thing up.’ Me- as I thought, that was the sound hole down there on her blowing into her vagina.’ Otherwise, so

he would have thought that what I would to someone we eye's- like on me doing nothing wrong. I said- 'She made the same sound as the band didn't, she- not as fuck at that one drum you tuned?'

Ray- I open my mouth and say, 'I love you too.' Ray looks hazy dazed and confused, even though he is crouching no more than a foot away from me.

'Hey, look at me.' I say with longing for his look. My eyes opened he

take me there full of delightful energy, I have now, don’t you see?

He looks at me saying these very words-

‘You must be hungry,’ he says gently.’

‘Let us get you home, okay?’ ‘Are you okay?’ He spoke.

‘Now are you okay to walk?’

He shuffles back a little, giving me space to stand.

‘No.’ It comes out more emphatically than I had intended, and Ray looks startled.

‘You’re not okay to walk?’

A little crease appears between his eyebrows.

‘No.’ It is a struggle to keep my voice at a normal volume. ‘I mean I can’t go home. At all.’ He sighs and rubs his forehead. I think he will be happy, but instead, he just seems tired.

He looks away, squinting. ‘Listen, Liv, it’s been a long day. You

are exhausted. You are hungry lust, desire, and your wanting, with complete pain.

You're not thinking clearly… don't you see.' The same path you are going down- I see her dad said to her.

'I am thinking clearly.' I feel that- I feel fucked up! Did I die some when she did? Dyeing on the inside… are you for her now? I haul myself to my feet, hopeless, so I do not look so helpless. I am angry at this boy, too- even though I know this is not his fault, what- so- ever.

‘Hello: I am your mind, giving you someone to talk to.’ But then again, the fury is whipping around inside of me, undirected, gaining force. ‘I can’t stay here Ray.

Not anymore…

Not after- not after… after that.’

My throat spasms as I swallow back the scream again. ‘They knew, my boy. They knew and they never told me, how they feel about him.’ How do you feel about him now?

He climbs to his feet too-slowly for my liking, like- it hurts him or some shit like that. ‘You don’t know that for sure,’ he says. I cut him off by the pass. Asking- ‘You don’t get it.’ A scream is welling inside of me, a black creepy- crawly scrabbling in my throat. All I can think is- they knew it was known.

They all knew- mom and dad and even my girl- Rachel- and still they let me believe all along that she was dead. They let me believe she had left me.

They let me believe I was not worth it. I am filled, suddenly, with white-hot anger, ablaze: If I see them, if I am going home, I will not be able to stop myself. I will not…do not you see this? I will burn the fucking apartment building down now, or tear it apart, plank by plank. ‘I want to run away with you. To the countries like the girl in the story. Like we talked about.’

‘I do know… do you?’

I insist, and it is true. I do know, deep down. I think of my mother 2 bent over me, the floating pale

whiteness of her face breaking through my sleep, her voice- I love you. Remember…? They cannot take it all the shit inside like me.

I see Hanna- sung quietly in my ear, the sad little smile dancing on her lips.

She knew too. She must have known they were coming for her and would take her to that terrible place. Besides only a week later, I sat in a scratchy black dress in front of an empty coffin with a pile of orange peels to suck on, trying to keep back tears,

not once more of them one girl I love while everyone- I believed inbuilt around me a solid, smooth surface of lies and red eyes. (‘She was sick’ ‘This is what the disease does call.’ ‘Suicide.’) I was the one who was buried that day. ‘I can’t go home, and I won’t. I will go with you. I ran… I ran… with him and his many…

~*~

‘Liv… if you leave- leave-it won’t be like it is for me now. You get that, right? You will not be able to go back and forth. You will not be able to

come back ever. we dated, yet not known to anyone. Your number will be invalidated.

Everyone will know you are a cheater. Everyone will be looking for you. If anyone found, you-if you were ever caught-'

Ray does not finish his sentence. She's gone so yah date the friend- right all the same no. 'Listen, liv. I am sorry. I know you have had- I mean, with the whole thing that comes about today- I can't imagine how you must be sensitive.'

We can make our home in the Wildernesses. Other individuals do it, don't they? Other people have done it. My mother, I want to say, my mother is going to do it, but my voice breaks on the word. Ray is watching me carefully and wondering why. 'I don't care,' I snap back saying, I am no longer able to control my temper. 'You were the one who suggested it, weren't you? So, what…? Now…? I'm ready to go, you take it back?' I said shouting.

'I'm just trying to- forget it.'

I cut Ray off again, rapid firing my mouth, coasting on the anger, the desire to shred, and hurt and tear apart. 'You're just like everybody else. You are as bad as all the rest of them. Conversation, exchange, dialog- it comes so easily to you. Nevertheless, when it's time to do whatever thing when it's time to help me…'

'I'm trying to help you…' Ray says sharply… 'It's a big deal…

Do you- understand that…? It is a huge choice- I must make or pick it here… in addition to that, he is so

pissed at me for what…? As well as you don’t know what you’re saying to me.’

He is getting angry too, the tone of his voice makes something painful run through me like a butt end of a spoon- blunt, but I cannot stop speaking.

Sometimes you even must give them up. Ray and I talk about all the things I will be leaving behind to go with him to the wildernesses. He wants to be sure that I know what we are getting into. Stopping by Bakery after closing and buying the day-old bagels,

and cheddar buns for a dollar each; sitting out on the piers and watching the gulls shriek and circle overhead; long runs up by the farms when the dew glistens off every blade of grass as though they are encased in glass; the constant rhythm of the oceans, beating under Pittsburgh.

~*~

Karly- ‘I’m fine…’ I push around some ravioli on my plate and slips down my chin, then I total my fork, and one falls on my boob. Normally, I can put away half a box

myself, especially after a long run or beating off my guitar or boy. Same thing with me… (and still, have room for dessert creamy no!), but I have barely managed to choke down a few bites. ‘Just stressed.’

‘Leave her alone,’ my mom 2 says.

‘She’s upset about the evaluations. They didn’t exactly turn out as planned.’

She lifts her eyes to my uncle, and they exchange a glance. I feel a rush of excitement. It is rare for my

mom, and dad to look at each other like that, a wordless glance, full of meaning. like a heartbeat, the narrow-paved streets of the old harbor, shops crowded with bright, pretty clothes- I could never afford, yet this thing I have is $10,000 that she gave up for this shit- for popularly, she not my big sis to me- she is not… any longer.

~*~

Put an end to, destroy, abolish I want to break everything- him, me, us, the whole city, the entire world.

I sing this shit- ‘‘Don’t treat me like a child,’ I say. I'm loving, not a fighter respectable to women, I am not Chris Brown I don't feel the need to hit 'em, it’s sad to see 12-year-old acting like a little ho, Takin' naked pictures while she's livin' in her parents' home Post 'em up on Twitter, it'd make u reconsider. Every time you go online to find a babysitter. Sometimes it makes me wanna blow my f*ckin head off!

But do not listen to a word I say, because it does not mean a thing… The world is full of hypocrites, and I am

the fucking king, it is not like I mean it, we are all in agreement. As soon as u hear this freaking song, I'm sure you'll just delete it…'

Yep!

I get this, do you?

'Then stop acting like one,' he rips off back at me. The second the words are out of his mouth- I can tell he regrets them. He turns partially away, inhales, and then says, in a normal tone of voice… It is strange, but after that moment in the passageway I suddenly understand the meaning of my full

name, the reason my mom named me Maddie- Liv in the first place, and the meaning of the old biblical story, of Joseph and his abandonment of Mary Madeleine. I understand that he gave her up for a reason. He gave her up so she could be saved, even though it killed him to let her go.

He gave her up for love.

My mother had a sense even when I was born that she would someday have to do the same thing. I guess that's just part of loving people:

You must give things up. Trace and Sana and the other girls are my only regrets. The rest of Pittsburgh. Can dissolve into nothing, for all I care: its shiny, spindly false towers and blind storefronts, and staring, obedient people, bowing their heads to receive more lies, like animals offering themselves up to be slaughtered.

'If we go together, it's just you and me,' Ray keeps repeating, as though needing to make sure I understand-as though needing to be sure that, I am sure.

‘No going back. Ever.’ And I say: ‘That’s all I want. Just you and me… always.’

I mean it too… I am not even afraid. Now that I know I will have him- that we have each other- I feel as though I will never be afraid of anything ever again.

We decide to leave Pittsburgh. in a week, exactly nine days before my scheduled procedure. I am nervous about delaying our departure so long- I am halfway tempted to make a straight run for the border fence and try to

barge my way through in broad daylight- but as Explain sentences usual, Marcel tranquilities me down and explains the importance of waiting. In the past few years, he has made the crossing only a handful of times. It is too dangerous to go back and forth more often than that. But in the next week, Marcel will cross twice before we make our final escape-an almost suicidal risk, but he convinces me it is necessary. Once he leaves with me and starts missing work and class, he will be invalidated too-even though, technically, his identity was never valid

in the first place, since it was created by the battle.

And once we are both canceled, we will be erased from the system. Gone.

Blip!

~*~

Everyone turns to look at me, even Tracie, who puckers her nose and tilts her head like a dog sniffing at something new.

‘Are you okay, Liv?’ my uncle asks, adjusting his glasses as though

hoping to bring me into a clearer focus. ‘You seem a little strange.’

Most of the time their interactions are limited to the usual thing-my uncle tells stories about work, my aunt tells stories about the neighbors. What is for dinner? There is a leak in the roof. Blah blah blah. I think that for once they are going to mention the Wilds and the Invalids. But then my uncle gives a minute shake of his head.

‘These kinds of mix-ups happen all the time,’ he says, staking a ravioli

with his fork. ‘Just the other day, I asked Andrew to reorder three cases of Vik’s orange juice. But he gets the codes wrong and guess what shows up? Three cases of baby formula. I said to him, I said, ‘Andrew -’’ I tune the conversation out again, grateful that my uncle is a talker, and happy that my aunt has taken my side. The one good thing about being kind of shy is that nobody bugs you when you want to be left alone. I lean forward and sneak a glance at the clock in the kitchen.

Seven-thirty, and we have not even finished eating. And afterward, I will have to help clear and wash the dishes, which always takes forever; the dishwasher uses up too much electricity, so we must do them by hand. Outside, the sun is streaked with filaments of gold and pink. It looks like the candy that gets spun at the Sugar Shack downtown, all gloss and stretch, and color. It will be a beautiful sunset tonight. At that moment the urge to go is so strong, I must squeeze the sides of my chair to keep from suddenly springing up and running out the door.

Finally, I decided to stop stressing and leave it to luck, or fate, or whatever you want to call it. If we finish eating, and I am done cleaning up the dishes in time to make it to Back and Gold Cove, I will go. If not, I will stay. I feel a million times better once I have made the decision, and even manage to shovel down a few more bites of ravioli before Jenny (miracle of miracles) have a sudden late burst of speed and cleans her plate, and my aunt announces I can clear the dishes whenever I am ready. The truth is, I do not know what would happen. I have never broken curfew.

Just as I have finally accepted that there is no way to get to Back Cove and back in time, my aunt does the unthinkable. As I am reaching forward to take her plate, she stops me. ‘You don’t have to clean the dishes tonight, Lena. I’ll do them.’

As she is speaking, she reaches out and puts a hand on my arm. Just like earlier, the touch is as fleeting and cool as the wind. And before I can think about what this means, I am blurting out, ‘Actually, I have to run to Hanna’s house quickly,’ I stand up and start

stacking everyone's plates. It is eight o'clock. Even if I can wash all the dishes in fifteen minutes and that is a stretch-it will still be difficult to get to the beach by eight-thirty. And forget about making it back by nine o'clock, when the city has a mandated curfew for all under-agers. And if I got caught on the streets after curfew.

'Now?' A look of alarm or suspicion? flickers across my aunt's face. 'It's nearly eight o'clock.' 'I know. We-she-she has a study guide she was supposed to give me. I just

remembered.’ Now the look of suspicion-it is suspicion, makes itself comfortable, drawing her eyebrows together, cinching her lips. ‘You don’t have any of the same classes. And your boards are over. How important can it be?’

‘It’s not for class.’ I roll my eyes, trying to conjure up Hanna’s nonchalance, even though my palms are sweating, and my heart is jerking around in my chest.

‘It’s like a guide full of pointers. For the evaluations. She

knows I need to prep more since I almost choked yesterday.' Again, my aunt directs a small glance at my uncle. 'Curfews in an hour,' she says to me. 'If you get caught out after curfew.'

I have never spoken back to her, have always tried to be as patient, obedient, and good as possible-have always tried to be as invisible as possible, a nice girl who helps with the dishes and the little kids and does her homework and listens and keeps her head down. I know that I owe mom for taking Kellie Nervousness makes my

temper flare. ‘I know about curfew,’ I snap… ‘I’ve only been hearing about it for my whole life.’ I feel guilty the second that the words are out of my mouth, and I drop my eyes to avoid looking at Carol. and me in after my mother died. If it were not for her, I would be wasting away in one of the orphanages, uneducated, unnoticed, destined for a job at a slaughterhouse cleaning guts or cow crap or something like that. Maybe- maybe! - if I were lucky, I would get to work for a cleaning service. No foster parent will

adopt a child whose past has been tainted by the disease.

I wish I could read her mind. I have no idea what she is thinking, but she seems to be analyzing me, attempting to read my face. I am not doing anything wrong, it is harmless, I am fine, over, and over, and wipe my palms on the back of my jeans, positive I am leaving a sweat mark.

'Be quick,' she says finally, and as soon as the words are out of her mouth, I am off, jetting upstairs and converting my sandals for sneakers.

Then I bang back down the stairs and fly out the door. She barely had time to take the dishes into the kitchen. She calls something to me as I blur past her, but I am already pushing out the front door and do not catch what she says. The ancient grandfather clock in the living room starts booming out just as the screen door swings shut behind me.

Eight o’ three clocks. I unlock my bike and pedal it down the front path and out into the street. The pedals creak and moan and shudder. This bike

was owned by my cousin Marcia before me and must be at least fifteen years old and leaving it outside all year is not doing anything to preserve it.

I start cruising in the direction of Back Cove, which is downhill, fortunately. The streets are always empty at this time of night. The cured are inside, sitting at dinner, or cleaning up, or preparing for bed and another night of dreamless sleep, and all the uncured are home or on their way there, nervously watching the minutes swirl away toward nine o’clock four

curfews. My legs are still aching from my run earlier today. If I make it to Back and Gold Cove on time and Ray is there, I am going to be a complete mess, sweaty and disgusting.

However, I keep going anyway. Now that I am out of the house I push all my doubts and questions out of my mind and focus on hauling ass as fast as my cramping legs will allow me, spinning down through the vacant streets toward the cove, taking every shortcut I can think of, watching the sun descend steadily toward the

blazing gold line of the horizon, as though the sky-a brilliant, electric blue at this point is water, and the light is just sinking through it.

I have only been out at this hour a few times on my own, and the feeling is strange-frightening and exhilarating at the same time, like talking to Ray out in the open earlier this afternoon: as though the revolving eye that I know is always watching has been blinded just for a fraction of a second, as though the hand you have been holding your whole life suddenly

disappears and leaves you free to move in any direction you want. Lights sputter in windows around me, candles, and lanterns, mostly; this is a poor area, and everything is rationed, especially gas and electricity.

After a minute's rest, I keep pedaling, slower now. I am still about a mile away, but the cove is visible, flashing off to my right. The sun is just teetering over the dark mass of trees on the horizon. I have ten, fifteen minutes' tops until total darkness. At a certain point I lose sight of the sun's

position beyond the four- and five-story buildings, which grow more densely packed after I turn onto Preble: tall, skinny, dark buildings, pressed up against one another as though already preparing for winter and huddling for warmth. I have not supposed about what I will say to Marcel, and the idea of standing alone with him suddenly makes my belly bottom out. I must pull my bike up abruptly, stop and catch my breath. My heart is pounding frantically.

Then another thought nearly stops me, hitting me traditional like a fist: He will not be there. I will be too late, and he will leave. Or this will turn out to be a big joke or a trick.

I wrap one arm around my stomach, willing the ravioli to stay put and pick up speed again.

Part: 12

I was having a fantastic dream until he awakens to reality, he was not dreaming, I was taking advantage of his morning ‘Hard On.’ It was very cold outside, but he was sweating from the

heat Annie was putting out. When Annie tasted his pre-cum, she rode him slowly and deeply. I got off and repeated her slow, deep, and wet oral of what she calls ‘MY- Penis.’ This went on for an hour before Ray exploded like a burst pipe under full pressure.

Daddy will never know…

I was too exhausted to talk once again, but I spoke up and said, ‘Thank you, Honey.’ He just barely able to speak said not this time baby, thank you for loving me. I crawled up on me

and told him what she does for him, she does for herself.

Listen to me… was said, if you are happy, I am happy. Besides, you gave me a great Christmas. If I cannot please my man, why am I here? Like I said yesterday, Teddy, marriage is so easy, loving you is easier. He did not say a word he just pulled me on top of him and just held her like he did not ever want to let her go.

I tried to get up and prepare breakfast for him, but he would not let her go. So, Annie decided to use her

trump card. This was… said in her sexy playful voice, you have not measured my pregnant butt in three days. He immediately reaches out and felt her ass.

When you are pregnant, how fast does it grow? I said if this were my second child, he I could tell you, but I do not have a clue. Get the tape measure and measure my stomach and butt. He released me and ran to the bathroom to get the tape. Wow, he shouted, your stomach is out another inch. Then the drum roll and the tally

on the size of her ass. It has also grown an inch.

I thought she had played him and was out of bed and on her way to getting dressed. Raymon had another plan, he grabbed her and said I will let you go on one condition. She gave a hum and said what is that illness. He said- wear that Santa's helper outfit and I will let you go. I laughed and said OK, that is a deal, I love that outfit.

It took him about five minutes to realize I left without bathing him. He ran downstairs and said I made a

mistake honey on our deal. I said a deal is a deal teddy boy. But then again you know how I look forward to you bathing me. Annie stopped preparing breakfast, walked up to Teddy, and asked if he was serious about her bathing him.

He kissed her on her forehead and told her he loves it when she bathes him.

He when on to tell her it not just his penis wash, but they are together in an intimate setting, alone, it as good as having sex with her. He when on to say they laugh, talk about

nothing serious, and looks forward to that at least twice daily. I said, I guess the coffee can wait because you cannot. I am about to speed through the long-defunct traffic light at Baxter when I am suddenly dazzled by a wall of zipping, bouncing light: the beams of a dozen flashlights directed into my eyes, so I must skid abruptly to a halt, lifting a hand to my face and nearly flipping over the handlebars-which would be a real disaster, since in my rush to get out of the house I forgot to bring my helmet.

‘Stop,’ the voice of one of the regulator's barks out-the leader in charge of the patrol, I guess. ‘Identity check.’ I am so busy circling one foot after the other left, right, left, right-and doing a mental tug-of-war with my digestive tract, that I do not hear the regulators coming.

Clusters of regulators-both volunteer citizens and the actual regulators laboring by the government-patrol the streets every night, looking for uncured breaking curfew, checking the streets and (if the curtains are

open) houses for unapproved activity, like two uncured touching each other, or walking together after dark-or even two cured engaging in ‘activity that might signal the reemergence of the deliria after the procedure,’ like too much hugging and kissing. This rarely happens, but it does happen.

Regulators report directly to the government and work closely with the scientists at the labs.

Watchdogs were responsible for sending my mother off for her third procedure; a passing patrol saw her

crying over a photograph one night right after her second failed treatment. She was looking at a picture of my father, and she had forgotten to close the curtains all the way. Within days, she was back at the labs. Customarily it is easy to avoid the regulators. You can practically hear them from a mile away. They carry walkie-talkies to coordinate with other patrolling groups, and the static interference of the radios going on and off makes it sound like a giant buzzing den of hornets is heading your way. I just was not paying attention. Mentally cursing myself for being so

stupid, I fish my wallet out of my back pocket. At least I remembered to grab that. It is illegal to go without ID in Pitt. The last thing anybody wants is to spend the night in jail while the authorities trying to verify your validity. ‘Magdalena Ellahaj,’ I say, trying to keep my voice steady, as I pass my ID to the regulator in charge. I can hardly make him out behind his flashlight, which he keeps trained on my face, forcing me to squint. He is big; that is all I know. Tall, thin, angular.

‘Ella,’ he repeats. He flips my ID over between his long fingers and looks at my identity code, a number assigned to every citizen of the USA. The first three digits identify your state, the next three your city, the next three your family group, the next four your identity. ‘And what are you doing, highway shit? Curfew’s in less than forty minutes.’ Less than forty minutes. That must mean it is eight-thirty. I shift on my feet, trying hard not to betray impatience. A lot of the regulators-especially the volunteer ones-are poorly paid city techs: window washes or gas-

meter readers or security guards. I take a deep breath and say as innocently as possible, ‘I wanted to take a quick ride down to Back and Gold Cove.’ I do my best to smile and look stupid.

‘I was feeling bloaty after dinner.’ No point in lying any more than that. I will just get myself in trouble. The lead regulator continues to examine me, the flashlight directed glaringly at my face, my ID card in his hand. For a second, he seems to waver, and I am sure he is going to let me go, but then he passes my ID to another

regulator. ‘Run it through with SVS, will you? Make sure it’s valid.’ My heart plummets.

SVS is the Secure Validation System, a computer network where all the valid citizenships, for every single person in the entire country, are stored. It can take twenty to thirty minutes for the computer system to match codes, contingent on how many other people are calling into the system. He cannot think I have forged an identity card, but he is going to waste my time while someone checks.

And then, unbelievably, a voice pipes up from the back of the group. ‘She’s valid, Gerry. I recognize her. She comes into the store. Lives at 119 Phillie.’ Gerry swings around, lowering his flashlight in the process. I blink away the floating dots in my vision. I recognize a few faces vaguely-a women who work in the local dry cleaners and spends her afternoons leaning in the doorway, chewing gum and occasionally- spitting out into the street; the traffic officer who works downtown near Franklin Pretrial, one of the few areas of Pittsburgh that have

enough car traffic to justify one; one of the guys who collect our garbage-and there, in the back, Deved Howard, who owns the Walmart down the street from my apartment.

He is super skinny and has hooded black eyes that remind me of a rat. But tonight, I feel like I could hug him. I did not even think he knew my name. He is never said a word to me except, ‘Will that is all today?’ after he has rung up my purchases, glowering at me from underneath the heavy shade of his eyelids. I make a mental note to

thank him the next time I see him. Normally my uncle brings home most of our groceries-canned goods and pasta and sliced meats from his combo deli and convenience store, Save a lot, all the way over on

Monroy Hill, but occasionally or Bilo, if we are desperate for toilet paper or milk, I will run out to the Walmart. Mr. Howard has always creeped me out. Gerry hesitates for a fraction of a second longer, but I can see that the other regulators are starting to get restless, shifting from

foot to foot, eager to continue the patrol and find someone to bust.

Gerry must sense it too because he jerks his head abruptly in my direction.

‘Let her have the ID.’ Relief makes me want to laugh, and I must struggle to look serious as I take my ID and tuck it into place. My hands are shaking ever so slightly. It is strange how being around the regulators will do that to you.

Even when they are being nice, you cannot help but think of all the bad

stories you have heard -the raids, the beatings, and the ambushes. ‘Just be careful,’ Marcel says, as I straighten up. ‘Make sure your home before curfew.’ He tilts his flashlight into my eyes again. I lift my arm to my eyes, squinting against the dazzle. ‘You wouldn’t want to get into any trouble.’

~*~

And I am only a few minutes from Back Cove. My heart picks up its rhythm as I think about skidding down the sloping hill of grass, seeing Marcel framed against the last, dazzling rays of

sun-as I think about that single word breathed into my ear.

~*~

Marcel says it lightly, but for a moment I hear something hard running under his words, a current of anger or aggression. But then I tell myself I am just being paranoid. Nope no matter what the regulators do, they exist for our protection, for our oral rights.

The regulators sweep away in a group around me, so for a few seconds, I am caught up in a tide of rough shoulders and cotton jackets,

unfamiliar cologne, and sweat smells. Walkie-talkies sputter to life and fade away again around me. I catch snippets of words and broadcasts: Market Street, a girl, and a boy, infected, unapproved music on St. Paul's, someone appears to be dancing - I get bumped side to side against arms and chests and elbows until finally, the group passes, and I spit out again, left alone on the street as the regulators' footsteps grow more distant behind me. I wait until I can no longer hear the fuzz of their radio chatter or their boots hitting the pavement. Then I take off,

feeling again a lifting sensation in my chest, that same sense of happiness and freedom. I cannot believe how easy it was to get out of the house. I never knew I could lie to my aunt- I never knew I could lie, period-and when I think, about how narrowly I escaped getting grilled by the regulators for hours, it makes me want to jump up and down and pump my fist in the air.

Tonight, the entire world is on my side. I tear down the street, which loops around the last mile down to Back and Gold Cove. And then I stop

short. The buildings have fallen away behind me, giving way to ramshackle sheds, sparsely situated on either side of the cracked and run-down road. Beyond that, a short strip of tall, weedy grass slants down toward the cove. The water is an enormous mirror, tipped with pink and gold from the sky.

In that single, blazing moment as I come around the bend, the sun-curved over the dip of the horizon like a solid gold archway-lets out its final winking rays of light, shattering the darkness of the water, turning

everything white for a fraction of a second, and then falls away, sinking, dragging the pink and the red and the purple out of the sky with it, all the color bleeding away instantly and leaving only dark.

Marcel was right I was he not...?

The regulators must have been wrong about the time. It must be after eight-thirty now. It was a gorgeous-one of the best I have ever comprehended.

For a moment I cannot move or do anything but stand there, breathing hard,

staring. Then an emotionlessness creeps over me. I am too late. Uniform if Marcel decides to wait for me somewhere along the long loop of the cove, I do not have a prayer of finding him and making it home before curfew.

My eyes sting and the world in front of me goes watery, colors and shapes sloshing together. For a second, I think I must be crying, and I am so

startled I forget forgetting about my disappointment and frustration, forget about Marcel standing on the beach, the thought of his hair catching the dying rays of the sun, flashing copper.

I cannot remember the last time I cried. It has been years. I wipe my eyes with the back of my hand, and my vision sharpens again.

It is just sweat, I realize, relieved; I am sweating, it is getting in my eyes. Still, the sick, leaden feeling will not work its way out of my stomach. I stay there for a few minutes,

straddling my bike, squeezing the handlebars hard until I am a little bit calmer. Part of me wants to say, screw it, to shove off, both legs extended, and go flying down the hill toward the water with the wind whipping up my hair- screw curfew, screw the regulators, screw everyone. But I cannot; I could not; I could never. I have no choice. I must get home.

On the way home I tell myself that it is for the best. I must be crazy, zooming around in the half-dark just to meet up with some guy on the beach.

Besides, everything has been explained: He works at the labs, just snuck in on evaluation day for some completely innocent reason-to use the bathroom or refill his water bottle. And I remind myself that I imagined the whole thing-the message, the meeting up. He is sitting in his apartment somewhere, doing coursework for his classes. I maneuver my bike around in a clumsy circle and start back up the street. Now that the adrenaline and excitement have faded, my legs feel like they are made out made iron I am panting before I have gone a quarter of

a mile. This time I am careful to stay alert for regulators, constabularies, and patrols.

He is already forgotten about the two girls he met at the lab multifaceted today. He was just being nice earlier, making casual discussion.

It is for the best. But no matter how many times I repeat it, the strange, hollow feeling in my stomach does not go away. And ridiculous as it is, I cannot shake the persistent, needling feeling that I have forgotten something, or missed something, or lost

something forever. Of all the systems of the body-neurological, cognitive, special, sensory-the cardiological system is the most sensitive and easily disturbed. The role of society must be to shelter these systems from infection and decay, or else the future of humans is at stake.

Food and me not friends- like- ‘I cut my finger and used a can opener one-handed.’ I was done…

Part: 13

Movie time- ‘Hey Pixar, maybe put some louder music in those sad

moments so a bitch can sniffle undetected.’

#- Hashtag- (Inside Out)

‘So- infected with deliria and in violation of the pacts of society, she fell in love with men who would not have her or could not keep her.’ Similarly, a summer fruit that is protected from the insect invasion, streak, and rot by the whole mechanism of modern farming; so, must we protect the heart. Her last love, they say, was the greatest: a man named Jo, an unmarried person all his life, who found her on the street,

bruised and broken and half-crazy from hallucinations.

We learned all about it in Biblical Science. First, there was John, then Matthew, then Jeremiah and some other one I can recall as of now, and Judas, and many other nameless men in-between.

There is some debate about what kind of man Jo was- whether he was righteous or not, whether he ever succumbed to the disease-but in any case, he took diligent care of her. He

nursed her to health and tried to bring her peace.

By this time, however, it was too late. She was tormented by her past, haunted by the love's lost and damaged and ruined, by the evils she had inflicted on others and that others had inflicted on her. She could hardly eat; she wept all day; she clung to Joseph and begged him never to leave her but could not find comfort in his goodness.

And then one morning, she woke, and Joseph was gone without a

word or an explanation. This final abandonment broke her at last and she fell to the ground, begging God to put her out of her misery.

He heard her prayers, and in his infinite compassion, he instead removed from her the curse of deliria, with which all humans had been burdened as punishment for the original sin of Eve and Adam. In a sense, Mary Magdalene was the very first cured.

‘And so- after years of tribulation and pain, she walked in

righteousness and peace until the end of her days.’ I always thought it was strange that my mother named me Magdalena. She did not even believe in the cure. That was her whole problem. And the Book of Lamentations is all about the dangers of deliria. I have done a lot of thinking about- it, and in the end- I guess I have figured out that despite everything, my mother knew that she was wrong: that the cure, and the procedure, where for the best. I think even then she knew what she was going to do-she knew what would happen. My name was her final gift to

me, away. It was a message. She was trying to say, Forgive me. She was trying to say, Someday, even this pain will be taken away.

Do you see it? No matter what everyone says, and despite everything, I know she was not all bad.

The next two weeks are the busiest of my life.

Like back on like- December 20th You know that lit girls must do that get ever longer- ‘That thing where you haven't shaved your legs in a bit, so

you decide to wait, and get a wax; but then you don't do that either.’

‘Every year the same question: what the hell are you supposed to buy men for Christmas? Besides socks or a sex doll? Merry Christmas! I hope everyone has put on at least 7 pounds today! Remember guys, the better she looks in that dress, the scarier her underwear is. Merry Christmas!

#- Hashtag: (Santa Brought Me Diabetes and Commando!)

Part: 14

Magazine time- ‘No. 1…???

Half-naked supermodels in Mad Max and Y'all went to see awkward chicks sing and do vagina jokes?? This is a world I can get behind.’ Sick…! >Look at this girl here< could be that, yet I fat and ugly. I so what to be them, or cute, at least that. I can eat a pie; God I feel overweight! At 100 pounds, and like four feet.

It is seven-thirty days before Christmas, his parents, at least his dad wants to see his pregnant daughter in law. Ray’s mother said her husband has

been on cloud nine since hearing the news. I so-o excited to see his parents, his dad dick hanging out. I wanted them to stay at their house since they have the mother in lawsuits ready, but he said not before the baby is born. He wants to hear a newborn crying. Annie now knows where he gets his weird sense of humor.

I finish making hot cocoa and they are going to watch Christmas movies on TV. He for the tenth time in the last ten minutes asked how she is feeling. Annie said I am feeling great.

Do you need or want anything? He said no, I am good. Annie told him- she is feeling a little neglected, he is not all over her like he used to be, and she misses that. I said- I just did not want to push you, or you know, I mean, I do not know when you are feeling your best. I said- calm down my daddy, when I am not feeling well, I will tell you OKAY. Pending then I want your hands all over me as you did before, I miss that. I found a good movie on TV and laid down between my legs hugging her thigh. Now and then he would kiss and suck her inner thigh. Annie patted him

on his head and said that is my good boy.

Christmas was on a Saturday this year, us- had taken two weeks off knowing- Teddy's parents were coming in and knowing they wanted time to themselves when it was all over. Timmy had called and said they would be over at six that evening and were bringing dinner. Annie was upstairs and called I call him my teddy to come to take a bath before Chuck and Liv showed up, we are friends even if she is older then I. Did he want to know why so early?

Annie said do not come, it is your loss. He ran like the flash.

When Ray entered the shower, he asked me what he was going to miss. I said in a minute, now hold still. When I got to the penis was, she dried her hands and told him to get that book from under a towel near the shower. He opens the book and saw dates with fractions and some whole numbers by each date which is a week apart. I said I do not get it. What do they mean? By this time, I was having a good laugh. My- Teddy shouted what I am missing.

I said I do not know if I should tell you before I hand wash your dick. She said what these small numbers would have to do with my dick! I said- those numbers; those small numbers represent how much bigger my ass is getting every week. He shouted what! Your ass has gained three inches since Thanksgiving. Annie said yes, I am surprised you did not notice. That is why I told you last night I want doggie-style; I was hoping you would notice. Congratulation's honey, you are getting a bigger ass to play with, just what you wanted. He shouted yes, that what I am

talking about. I said yes, I am talking about how hard your dick got since I told you, but it easier to wash.

By the time- he and I got there. We had measured my ass six times. After the couples had eaten, both wanted to talk with them Kelly was in the kitchen, with Liv a new friend from middle school when Ray called her.

Liv went and sat by Chuck. Liv started by saying how much they love me and him. Timmy then said why they would like to get married on the same day as they got married, it is on a

Friday next year and Annie will have given birth. Annie and Teddy said that is great. We feel honored that you would cherish our special day as your own.

I jumped up and hugged Liv, Ray- high.

The couple asked to keep it quiet until they tell their parents. they wanted to wait until little MY- Teddy was able to walk as the ring bearer, but he just wanted to marry Liv as soon as possible. I and Lisa at the same time

said, ‘How do you know it’s going to be a boy!’

Timmy as cool as he could be, replied, ‘My mom said her black hair, just like I was so full and shiny, just like I when she was pregnant with me, therefore, Kellie is carrying a boy.’ Of course, I and Lisa laughed at him. Teddy just said, there is a lot of judgment in that statement. I and Lisa laughed at Teddy also.

Annie said I bet it was that doggie style that hurt you, you shot a pint in me, I thought your cum would

never stop coming out of me. My-
Teddy just barely able to speak for
laughing said, that was good, no, that
was great. He kissed Annie and told her
she might be right, that orgasm was
different.

~*~

(In the shower)

I notice her stomach was out
just a little, she shouted at teddy to
look at it and confirm. I told her it is ut
a little. Hanna left the shower soaking
wet to call her mother. He is standing
there pleading with her to wait until

after the penis wash. I was still laughing at him when her mother answered the phone. She asked her what she was laughing so hard about. I just said he was being silly. When I told her mom about her stomach, her mom told her to be at her house first thing in the morning so she could see it, or she could come to my house. She is very charged up about Karly maybe-pregnancy and she wants to experience every aspect of it.

When I finally returned to the shower, he was standing there with the tape measure.

Annie said oh, you want to measure my stomach. Teddy said I only measure your ass; you can measure your stomach. I was playing with it turned around and bent over. He went 'WOW' that ass is getting huge. I stood up and started to hit Ray, then said I will let you have your seven and half months of fun. I started to laugh and told her to show her- pussy and her breast will get bigger also, will you

measure them. I said no, I have a flashlight to inspect that monster to me, and my hands for your breasts. They both started laughing.

With three days to go before Christmas, I told her he would drive her to her parents' house. I did not want to take any chances with the holiday traffic. As they were driving, I asked him if they could ride around tonight and watch the Christmas lights. He told her that would be great. They could grab some sandwiches from Timmy and get some cocoa. I said I will

make the cocoa the way you like it, and we can get just the sandwiches from Bill's.

I have created a grandma to be a monster with her mom. She was going crazy over Hannie's baby bump that he made for her. Then Mrs. Irene said that butt is getting big. That made me smile which Mrs. Irene notice. Then she did the big no-no, she called his mom and told her about I bump. Instead of flying out tomorrow evening, his parents, his mom, are flying out first thing in the morning.

Do it more so not then…

~*~

I got out of the hot shower, and my damp body was still wrapped in a towel when Ray commanded, ‘Come to me, baby.’ That stimulating, stern voice was coming from above me. My stomach did flips just as I stopped at the entrance of the walk-in closet. That domineering voice had me hypnotized. It was sexy, guiding, welcomed, and turned me on. I started panting, my body tingling and warming. That overassertive tone in which he used

spoke volumes of what he had planned. I did not know if I was going to get palmer and such- (Ray's assertive yet loving palm against my ass cheeks) I turned and looked up at the second level of the walk-in closet, and he was leaning on the railing, looking pointedly at me, shirtless and barefoot. That was a glorious, breathtaking view.

With my eyes set on him, I obeyed and climbed the stairs at an even pace. The further I climbed to the second level, gaze steady with his, the more he lured me in.

My pussy was already thumping, preparing itself for Ray's huge invasion, in any position he so desired. When I finally reached him, he stood directly in front of me, our bodies barely touching, pulled the towel free from me with authority, and, with his delectable lips a mere inch from mine, he seductively said, 'This towel has no use; it's only a distraction.' He threw it to the floor.

The heat his body radiated told of the inferno within. He was burning with desire, and I knew a short sex-ing

was not going to put out that fire- she and I were going to be up all night long. I felt the goosebumps form on my skin just as he softly nuzzled against my neck, groaning under his breath, until he gently bit my earlobe and demanded, ‘Follow me inside you.’ Always obedient, I followed him deeper into the closet, admiring the back view of his sexy, toned body and nice tight ass in a pair of black low-rise lounge pants he wore. He leaned against one of the necktie racks, left ankle over right, barefoot, and with his sculpted arms crossed across his chiseled chest.

With his eyes fixed on me and burning with undeniable, shameless need, he motioned his head to a pair of burgundy, four and a half-inch pink cuff fuzzy pumps in the center of the room and said, ‘Put them on.’

With a smile, I obeyed, slipping my right foot in first and bending over to buckle the ankle strap. I did not need to look in Ray's direction to see if he was taking in the sight- I felt his eyes on me, swallowing me whole. After I got the left shoe on, I looked down at my feet, turning each foot in various

angles, loving how beautiful they looked on my feet.

He made his way to me, his hot, hard body pressed close against mine, and while gesturing his left hand in an offering manner, he commanded, ‘Pick a tie.’ At the sound of that, my heart skipped a beat and then picked up the pace. He had never ordered or given me that option before. Pick a tie… What was Ray about to do to me? He knew I would be baffled, and that I was as I stood in shock, staring at him in my naked glory, nipples getting

harder pussy wetter and a fire boiling in my own core. But then again, without delay, I walked over to the wall, gently brushed my left hand along a row of ties as I walked from one end of the closet to the other, adding fuel to the fire- teasing him oh so cutely- by swaying my hips and looking back at him over my shoulder. I felt sexy in my pumps and birthday suit, and the look on my husband’s face said he thought so, too. I selected a red tie to match my new pumps and turned to Hannie with a smile.

‘I choose this one,’ I said you like this for him too?

‘That one is for your left wrist,’ he said with a smile equal to mine but firm enough that I knew he was in control of the events to follow. ‘Now pick one for your right wrist.’ I complied, and when I turned to hand the two to him, he took them from my hand and said, ‘Now two more.’ He set his gorgeous greenish-grey eyes on me before love the contacts- raising them back to meet eyes with me, his sexy medium-thick brows raised up some.

Now his smile was a devilish grin, and all I could ask myself was, what is this sexy, forceful man of mine going to do to me?

Every day after school there is an assembly or ceremony, or graduation party to go to. Hana gets invited to all of them; I get invited to most, which surprises me. Marlowe has invited most of the graduating class-there are sixty-seven of us in total and fifty at the party-which makes me feel less special, but it is still fun.

We sit in the backyard while the housekeeper runs in and out of the house with plates and plates of food-coleslaw and potato salad and other barbecue stuff-and her father turns out spareribs and hamburgers on the enormous smoking grill. I eat until I feel like I am about to burst and must roll back onto the blanket I am sharing with Hanna. Kellie-who lives with Hanna in the Northern End, and whose father does something for the government-invites me to come over for a ‘casual good-bye thing.’ I did not even think she knew my name-whenever she

is talking to Hanna her eyes have always skated past me like I am not worth focusing on. I go anyway. I have always been curious about her house, and it turns out to be as spectacular as I imagined. Summer explodes into Pitt.

In early June the heat was there but not the color-the greens where still pale and tentative, the mornings had a biting coolness-but by the last week of school everything is Technicolor and splash, outrageous blue skies and purple thunderstorms

and ink-black night skies and red flowers as bright as spots of blood.

Her family has a car, too, and electric appliances everywhere that get used every day, washers and dryers, and huge chandeliers filled with dozens and dozens of light bulbs.

We stay there until curfew, when the stars are peeking through a curtain of dark blue and the mosquitoes rise all at once and we all go shrieking and laughing back into the house, slapping them away. Afterward, it is

one of the nicest days I have had in a long time.

Even girls I do not like-like Shy, who has hated me since sixth grade, when I won the science fair, and she took second place-start being nice. It is because we all know the end is close. Most of us will not see one another after graduation, and even if we do it will be different. We will be different. We will be adults-cured, tagged, and labeled, paired, identified, and placed neatly on our life path,

perfectly round marbles set to roll down even well-defined slopes.

Theresa Grass turns eighteen before school ends and gets cured; so, does Shy-. They are absent for a few days and come back to school just before graduation.

It is like all their anxiety and self-consciousness has been removed along with the disease. Even the legs have stopped trembling. Whenever she used to have to speak in class, the trembling would get so bad it would rock the desk. But after the procedure,

just like that-whoosh! The shaking stops.

Of course…

They are not the first girls in our class to get cured- Hanna and Hannie- Hahn were both cured ways back in the fall, and half a dozen other girls have had the procedure this past semester-but in them the difference is somehow more pronounced. The change is amazing. They seem peaceful now, mature, and somehow remote like they are encased in a thin layer of ice.

Only two weeks ago Theresa's nickname was Theresa Gross, and everyone made fun of her for slouching and chewing on the ends of her hair and being a mess, but now she walks straight and tall with her eyes fixed straight in front of her, her lips barely curled in a smile, and everyone shifts a little in the halls so she can pass easily. The same thing goes for her.

I keep going with my countdown. Eighty-one days, then eighty, then seventy-nine. Willow Marks never comes back to school.

Rumors filter back to us that she had her procedure and it turned out fine; that she had her procedure and now her brain is going haywire, and they are talking about committing her to the Vaults, Pitts's combo prison-and mental- ward; that she ran away to the Wilds. Only one thing is for sure: The whole Marks family is under constant surveillance now. The regulators are blaming Mr. and Mrs. Parkings- and the whole extended family-for not instilling in her a proper education, and only a few days after she was found in Oaks Park next to the old school, I overheard

my aunt and uncle whispering that both of Willow's parents have been fired from their jobs. A week later we hear that they have had to move in with a distant relative. People kept throwing rocks at their windows, and a whole side of their house was written over with a single word: WELL-WISHES.

It makes no sense because Mr. and Mrs. Parkings were on record insisting that their daughter have the procedure early, despite the risks, but as my aunt says, people, get like that when they are scared. Everyone is

terrified that the deliria will somehow find its way into Pittsburgh on a large scale. Everyone wants to prevent an epidemic. And it may sound awful, but I do not think about Willow's family for long. There is just too much end-of-high school paperwork to file, and worried energy, and lockers to spotless out and final exams to take, and people to say goodbye to. I feel bad for the Marks family, of course, but that is the way things are. It is like the regulators: You may not like the patrols and the uniqueness checks, but since you know

it is all done for your protection, it is dreadful not to liaise.

Part: 15

Hanna and I can barely find time to run together. When we do, we stick to our old routes by silent agreement. She never mentions the afternoon at the labs again, to my surprise.

Hanna’s mind- tends to skip around, and her new obsession is a collapse at the northern end of the border that people are saying might have been caused by Invalids. I do not

even consider going down to the labs again, not for one single solitary second. I focus on everything and anything besides my lingering questions about Marcel-which is not too hard, considering that I now cannot believe I spent an evening biking up and down the streets of Pitt, lying to Mom and the regulators, just to meet up with him.

On graduation day Hanna sits three rows ahead of me at the commencement ceremony. As she files past me to take her seat she reaches

out for my hand- two long pumps, two short ones-and when she sits down, she tilts her head back the very next day it felt like a dream or a delusion. I tell myself I must have gone temporarily insane: brain scramble, from running in the heat. So, I can see that she has taken a marker and scrawled on the top of her graduation cap: THANK GOD! I stifle a laugh, and she turns around and makes a pretend-stern face at me. All of us are giddy, and I have never felt closer to the St. Anne's girls than that day-all of us sweating under the sun, which beams down on us like an

exaggerated smile, fanning ourselves with the commencement brochures, trying not to yawn or roll our eyes while Principal Ass wipe drones on about ‘adulthood’ and ‘our entrance into the community order,’ nudging one another and tugging on the collars of our scratchy graduation gowns to try to let some air down our necks.

Family members sit in white plastic folding chairs, under a cream white tarp fluttering with flags: the school flag, the city flag, the state flag, the American flag. They applaud

politely as each graduate goes up to receive her diploma. When it is my turn I scan the audience, looking for my aunt and my sister, but I am so nervous about tripping and falling as I take my place on the stage and reach for the diploma in the principal's hand, I cannot see anything but color- green, blue, white, a mess of pink and brown faces-or make out any individual sounds beyond the shush of clapping hands. Only Hanna's voice, loud and clear as a bell: Liz!' That is our special pump- a chant that we used to do before track meets and tests, a

combination of both of our names. Afterward, we line up to take individual portraits with our diplomas. An official photographer has been hired, and a royal blue backdrop set up in the middle of the soccer field, where we all stand and pose. We are too excited to take the pictures seriously, though. People keep doubling over laughing in their pictures, so all you can see is the crown of their heads.

When it is my turn for a picture, at the very last second Hana jumps in and throws one arm around

my shoulders, and the photographer is so startled he presses down on the shutter anyway.

Click! There we are: I am turning to Hana, mouth open, surprised, about to laugh. She is a full head taller than me, has her eyes shut and her mouth open. I do think there was something special about that day, something golden and even magic because even though my face was all red and my hair looked sticky on my forehead, it is like Hana rubbed off on me a little bit- because despite

everything, and just in that one picture, I look pretty. More than pretty.

We did it! We did it!' And none of the parents or teachers try to separate us. As we start to break away, I see them encircling us, watching with patient expressions, hands folded. I catch my aunt's gaze and my stomach does a weird twist and I know that she, like everyone else, is giving us this moment -our last moment together, before things change for good and forever. And things will change-be changing, even at that second.

Attractive, even. The school band keeps playing, mostly in tune, and the music floats across the field and is echoed by the birds wheeling in the sky. It's like something lifts at that moment, some huge pressure or divide, and before I know what's happening all my classmates are crushing together in a huge hug, jumping up and down and screaming, 'We did it! As the group dissolves into clumps of students, and the clumps dissolve into individuals, I notice Theresa Gross and Shy- already starting across the lawn toward the street. They are each walking with their

families, heads down, without once looking back.

They have not been celebrating with us, I realize, and it occurs to me I have not seen Ray and Rena or Annie Pahniez or the other cured's either. They must have already gone home. A curious ache throbs in the back of my throat, even though of course this is how things are: Everything ends, people move on, they do not look back.

It is how they should be. I catch sight of Rachel through the crowd and go running up to her,

suddenly eager to be next to her, wishing she would reach down and ruffle my hair as she used to when I was extraordinarily little, and say, ‘Good job, Loony,’ her old nickname for me.

‘Rachel!’ I am breathless for no reason, and I have trouble squeezing the words out. I am so happy to see her I feel like I could burst into tears. I do not though.

‘Congratulations, Lena.’ I stick my face in the flowers and inhale,

trying to fight down the urge to reach out and hug her.

‘You came.’

‘Of course, I came.’ She smiles at me.

‘You’re my only sister, remember?’ For a second, we just stand there, intermittent at each other, and then she reaches out to me. She passes me a bouquet of daisies she has brought with her, loosely wrapped in brown paper. I am sure she is going to put her arms around me for old times’

sake, or at the very least give me a one-armed squeeze.

Instead, she just flicks a bang off my forehead. ‘Gross,’ she says, still smiling. ‘You’re all sweaty.’ It is stupid and immature to feel disappointed, but I do. ‘It’s the gown,’ I say and realize that yes, that must be the problem: The gown is what is choking me, stifling me, making it hard to breathe. All the voices intermingle and become indistinguishable from one another-like the constant white noise of the ocean running underneath the rhythm of the

Pitt streets, so constant you hardly notice it. ‘Come on,’ she says. ‘Mom will want to congratulate you.’ Mom is standing at the field’s periphery with my uncle, Grace, and Jenny, talking to Mrs. Panderer, my history teacher. I fall into step beside Rachel. She is only a few inches taller than I am and we walk together, coordinated, but separated by three feet of space. She is quiet. I can tell she is already wondering when she can go home and get on with her life.

I let myself look back once. I cannot help it. I watch the girls circulating in their orange gowns like flames. Everything seems to zoom back, recede away at once. Everything looks stark, vivid, and frozen, as though drawn precisely and outlined in ink- parents' smiles frozen, camera flashes blinding, mouths open and white teeth glistening, dark glossy hair and deep blue sky, and unrelenting light, everyone drowning in light-everything so clear and perfect

I am sure it must already be a memory or a dream.

H is for hydrogen, a weight of one; when fission's split, as brightly lit's hot as any sun.

He is for helium, a weight of two.

The noble gas, the ghostly pass
That lifts the world anew.

Li is for lithium, a weight of three; A funeral pyre, when touched with fire- And deadly sleep for me.
During the summers I must help my

uncle at the Save a lot Mondays, Wednesdays, and Saturdays, mostly stocking shelves and working behind the deli counter and occasionally helping with filing and accounting in the little office behind the cereal and dry goods aisle. Thankfully, in late June, Andrew Marcus gets cured and reassigned to a permanent position at another grocery store.

On the Fourth of July, I head to Hana's house in the morning. Every year we go to see the fireworks at the Eastern Promenade.

In recent years Hanna and I have made it a kind of game to stay out until the last possible second, cutting it closer and closer every year.

Hana’s last name is Tate, and we were linked up by alphabetical order (by then I was already going by my aunt’s last name, Tiddle.)

Part: 16

A band is always playing, and vendors set up their carts, selling fried meat on skewers and corn on the cob and apple pie floating in a puddle of ice cream, served in little paper boats. The

Fourth of July-the day of our independence, the day we commemorate the closing of our nation’s border forever-is one of my favorite holidays. I love the music that pipes through the streets, love the way the steam rising thick from the grills makes the streets look cloudy, the people shadowy and unclear. I especially love the temporary extension of curfew: Instead of being home at nine o’clock, all uncured are allowed to stay out until eleven. Last year I stepped into the house at 9:46 precisely, heart hammering in my

chest, shaking with exhaustion- I would have to sprint home. But then again, I lay in bed I could not stop grinning. I felt like I had gotten away with something. I type in Hana's four-digit gate code- she gave it to me in eighth grade, saying it was 'a sign of trust' and that she had slit me 'from the top of the head to the heels' if I shared it with anyone else -and slip in through the front door. I never bother knocking. Her parents are hardly ever home, and Hana never answers the door. I am the only person who comes over to see her.

It is weird…

Hanna was always popular in school-people looked up to her and wanted to be like her-but even though she was friendly with everybody, she never really got close- close to anyone besides me. Sometimes I wonder whether she wishes she had been assigned a different desk partner in Mrs. Sariseraski's second-grade class, which is how we first became friends. I wonder whether she wishes she had been placed with Becca Jralawny, or Katie La-carp, or even Merissa

Poinortofa. Sometimes I feel like she deserves a best friend who is just a little more special.

~*~

It felt as if my heart was ripped out of my chest. It was official; the doctors confirmed what I dreaded the most. You were dead. The doctor sadly told your mother the devastating truth. She raised her hand to her mouth and tears started to swell up into her eyes. I comforted her as she fell apart in her grief. Her child was gone. He passed away four in the morning where his

heart gave up. I shared her grief because I loved you so much that it hurt to know that you were gone. Gone forever. Your funeral was a small private matter. It was a rainy June day when we buried in the Irving Park Cemetery where your grandfather lay. Dressed in black, everyone you knew and loved you came to say goodbye. I stood beside your mother and held her hand as- she softly sobbed into her handkerchief. The priest in his clergy outfit moved his lips as he read passages from the Bible. As your casket

lay down on the earth, there was silence.

The night of your funeral, I never felt so empty in my life. You were a part of me, a part of my life. I loved you so much, but now you are gone. Your sister stayed with me that night, she told me how your death would change things between your mother and father, and I know this to be true.

Your sister stayed with me that night and in the morning, he was gone. She left me a letter and thanked me for letting her stay. She was leaving

Chicago for good this time and told me to tell her mother that she loved her. In the weeks since your death, life went on or as they say, I moved on from the heartache. I was completing my degree at university. Remember, how you would tease me about being a bookworm. I thought English would be a good degree. My parents are doing well in the bakery. You used to love to go there. My parents have been understanding about your death to me and helped me through it. I spent the night there, at my folk's place. Maybe because my mother missed me and

since I already home, I might as well crash there.

There was no word from your sister. Your mother was frantic when she came over to my house. My mother comforted her when she sobbed. Becca was the only thing that held her together.

Your father, as your mother told us, was with his lover, and she never felt so alone. I knew Erica was in Europe, but I did not if she meant when she said she would not come back.

Twilight lined the horizon the next morning, and for a while, I ran down the sidewalk across the neighbors of the community. The adrenaline hit me as I kicked off my feet. My breath was rugged; I was sweating but I kept going. I remembered how you would join me in my morning run and we would run in silence but together. After the hard exhortation, we would collapse on the main empty football field of our former high school, and you would turn and smile, that wicked gleam in your eyes, and ask, ‘Ever

consider not giving a damn about the world, but think about yourself?'

I remember telling you I did not care about myself. I was, as my mother told me, selfless.

You would laugh, your blue eyes sparkling, and said, 'You must think of yourself for once, Emma. There is no crime in being selfish, even only for a while.'

You were right that day, Alvin, I was selfish. I did not want you to die. I knew that you were suffering from depression, but I did not know how

great you suffered. I knew things at home were hard, with your parents fighting all the time. Your father's drinking habits were stressing you out as well as your sister. But I should have told your life was worth more than the suffering.

And now, I lay on the empty field, arms stretched out, and gasping for breath after all that running. The sun is coming out; the sky is changing to blue. I insert my earphones into my ears and click the play button where Bon Jovi's song, always plays on:

It has been raining since you left me. Now I am drowning in the flood. You see I have always been a fighter. But without you, I give up. As I closed my eyes, I remembered the time you and I talked about death. We were fifteen at that time, and my grandmother had died to lose her battle with cancer. I remember how I sobbed hysterically, but you watched me with understanding in your eyes and a calm façade. Then you sat beside me after the funeral and you said, ‘Do grieve for her. She wouldn’t want you too.’

I asked you how you could say such a thing, but you shook your head and said, ‘Listen, Em. You know your grandma loved you and she loved you too. If you love her, you will not grieve for her. She is not coming back. I know it sounds harsh, but it is true. Death leaves a mark on the heart, but love gives you an everlasting memory, and in her memory, you should smile and think of the good things about your grandma, and by remembering, you will move on from the ache and sorrow.’

I asked you that day if you died would not you want any want to grieve for you? You smiled and laughed, ‘That would be ridiculous,’ you said, ‘Why would anyone sob over me?’ Then you calmed your eyes and said, ‘Death is inevitable. It completes where life begins. The wheel comes full circle.’ ‘If I die, do not grieve for me, she always remembers me. That’s all I ask of you.’ I opened my eyes when the flashback ended and got to my feet. There was no point in reliving the past for was almost melancholic. I turned, not looking back, and continued with my run. It was July

now. Summer was at its height, the sun shone gold, the trees rustled in the wind, and I continued with life. I was there did I see your sister. Erica smiled at me, and I was surprised to see her. She came over to me and we decided to head to Starbucks on her. We entered the shop and after ordering, I took my Frappuccino and we sat in the nearest booth and talked.

I asked her how she was doing, and she told me that somehow after accepting that you were gone, she moved on and started looking on the

brighter side of things. ‘Becca wouldn’t want me to grieve over him,’ Bacca said to me, ‘He would have wanted me to live my life. He would have wanted me happy.’

I tore at that and told her that was exactly what you wanted from her. She was your younger sister. You loved her.

‘Mom and Dad are getting divorced,’ Erica said, ‘Alvin’s death was the breaking point, although, I knew that everything was going bad before…’ she trailed.

I asked how her mother was doing, and Erica sighed, ‘Not well. She is still grieving.’ I asked her if there was anything to help her, and Erica’s blue eyes became shadowed, ‘I don’t know, Emma, but…’ she swallowed, ‘I’m scared she might…’ I knew what your mother thought of. Suicide. The only option.’ ‘And I don’t want that,’ Erica said, ‘I lost Alvin, and I don’t want to lose her too.’

I took her hand and squeezed it, for it was the only thing I can do.’ Then Bacca decided and told me that

the only way for your mother to recover was to have her go traveling and leave Chicago for a while. It was a splendid idea, and I knew that the only way to heal the heart was enjoying life, and your mother needed that.

When I waved Bacca and your mother goodbye at the airport, I drove myself home. I shrugged off- and a back and kicked off my shoes. When I sat on my bed and opened a book to read, her letter- It was from you, about a month before your death. My hands shook as I

ripped the envelope and unfolded the letter.

Your handwriting scribbled on the paper told me that as you lay in the hospital, the doctor giving you morphine, you knew that soon you were going to die. You feel it, you wrote. Emma, you wrote, do not cry at my grave as they bury me. I am not gone. I am a part of you as you are a part of me. I love you, Em. I always have and always will. Always remember me. That is all I ask of you.

I know you said, not to cry, but that night, I did cry. I cried tears spilling down my cheeks, burying my face in my pillow. I cried not because you died, but because you loved me, and I never had the chance to tell you the same.

My mother, who heard me crying- came into my room, and sat beside me. She cradled me in her arms and soothed my tears away. I stooped my tears in her arms as she pulled me to sleep, and I did fall asleep.

The next day, I stood at your-grave. I placed the flowers on your tombstone and looked at your name that was carved in I crouched on the floor and reflected on what you told me. Always remember me. That is all I ask of you.

‘I love you. I love you and will always. ‘I stood up and walked away. I would not look back. I would remember you. I love you. In a way, love gives us a meaning for remembrance.

I got into my car and played the Bon Jovi CD. Always, my favorite

song played, and as I turned the car on and drove away from the cemetery, Jovi's voice filled the air:

I will be there till the stars do not shine- Till the heavens burst and…

The words do not rhyme-

And I know when I die-

You will be on my mind-

And I will love you-

Always-

Part: 17

Fingers in me…

Something you did not know…

The girl just like Karly: that why I like it here… all the same in their ways. Marcel- middle school, I was in John Miller's classes, and do the same old shit as normal for a guy like me in my grouping, seven out of six was in that class, I swear to you this is true. That day the first day of school, I had on my new gold shorts and OCC top, now home- it was time to go out- like all ways, and blue dusk pail brown-sh to me- 2003 Toyota Camry, I was in… as we pulled into the now go best gas

station, her dad was there all the time or so, I knew him well. Long hair and looking like a hippie, now in a rock band, Muffled voice, yet yells it all out- her hero- I shit you not.

The arcing wavy she made- it is embedded in my mind after all this time.

So, is she… she looks at me- she was sitting on the red bare by the pump, what your name, hi- I am Kristen, I looked at here and it was hard to make words, love at first sight- I think so?

The place red, white, and blue… ‘Do you want to take my daughter to the town?’ ‘Sure,’ we did even really know anything about each other, yet we feel the love. She stopped dead in her tracks and so did I. Yet fate to place right I did not believe in- it eater and that goes for the both of us.

It just does not happen… that's life… is it not? His dad- black hair- brown eyes and love blue… you would not get this in seventy-seven years who he is. Crazy he asked my sexy-year-old

grannie to marry him the first day wired- but true, the good guy right.

The best drummer in the world- not at that time after losing it all. And beating himself up over the death if he is the best friend, in another big-time rock band. He was drinking hard, and not doing music any longer, yet his girl was all he had to keep going.

Her- brown eyes- short- covey- and the hips that only she has, heart, shaped. She looked fine in them jeans, next to kores bar, ever another window

out, or boarded over and bars on those. It like she hexes me from not keeping a girl only here in my heart. Black nail posh was on her hands- That is why it was so hard to fall.

Skipping through my memories- striped shirt she had on-

He has glasses, on as we were both locked in that gaze. Out of all the actus look how I picked not knowing this… was all for her and on her way back when.

~*~

(Aww her mouth dropped when I cracked how she was as she was playing in my mind and rushing tough my blood, I thought I was crazy hearing the voice, that I remember but could not place until a year later. She said quotes- of September 9, 2003- And it hit me she was Kristen, of the past days of days and times of times. Next, she going to say she is Sia. Or be in the Foo Fighters- Maybe- no. She has cups…)

~*~

What I time I had here not seen but felt nothing but here, she was in my

room to do this- and not she there all the time, do not ask just to go with it. Why did not I see this… sooner no I that to think she was some girl from my hometown, playing a game just as she would for, she is a lot like her… the day she went away… I found one that was the same in all ways in her actions.

So, there it was- we held hand… in the back… in the car… at four p.m. His grandmother driving… the CD player blasting gospel country the Dannie O'Donalled or something-

ah- in my ears- yet I was all into him and not that.

Religion to me was a joke at that time… I have it now… do not ask… yet mom passing can do that. My faith was shaking, if there at all, dads too. Looking into her big brown eyes, she was looking back into mine feeling the same young but in love.

She led the way of my first in everything- this is true, I shit you not. There is a lot of shit jokes with us and yes- I sometimes want to hold the bunny. She and I are the same in every

way… every way- it just clicks with us and do that makes things hot. I love her giggle then, and it is the same now- heart to get when it is coming through- you and you do not know whom she is for six weeks, but damn- I got her- now and then.

We have come a long way- cybernetics. Ha- do not cross the one that she has… or face the wrath of daddy or piss them off she has that- power within. Yet no one in his dumb ass town knew who I was or my dad or try to get to know him, their ass hole,

and I found out what that one meant to them too, more than I thought. I hope you pound- you are the dicks!

Besides, I was there… in the Land of Many Steeples. Barnesboro- Pa. I was there- you all saw me, with him- the band- all around the land you saw him with me… what did you think? What did you think, I know what I think about you all? I do not like what I see… in the eyes of this town, yet I get him, and that is all the matter to me and not you that believed their lies, do not give me shit about him either I do not buy it

for I know him, unlike you… and now look at what he did.

I love this girl like she will stick her finger up my nose, and whatever.

I love this boy he will give me a Wet- Willy at any time.

X-O

Both nuts- we say back here.

Now that is adorable!

She makes fun of the way I talk all pa and shit.

-And he says everything I do is cute.

‘Say I did do this- you don’t give me credit, or anything anyways so take it- hope you feel good about yourself when you do- take it away like everything- take it. This all mine and you will never take that away now!’

The first in everything- yet get that… now look she is going to play this in life and this… on too. The kiss… The- that… the holding hands too.

The lovesick feeling… for Kristen Majah. It for she is the Jewish

girl that had sex with a Father a the - Catholicism you better now than what you are if your catholic church, for the sin of being her, and being her race, yet I am blond and blue eyes, do you love me now? They did it in the confession both a swear to God they did… I was next on over- for what I think new about us she and I, and he- and he was the altar server that he wanted too and that why.

I spent lots and lots of time looking for her online when she let to go to Pittsburgh, or so the story went, I

could not find her- no- I could not- I look thought moon schools, and she was nowhere to be found, not listed in any of the towns. Yah eat your heart out! She went out of my life; he was gone for I was making movies and music. Yet it was her grandmother I got on the phone, saying she was too young. When really, she was a stare now.

(What!)

I never- ever forgot about her…

Never…

Ever…

Every time I pass that old blue home…

Or the gas station that is not there any longer I think about her- the girl- I feel too! The true falling, the first one, no one forgets there the first time. (I know what you meant! She said cutely.)

Marcel- It did not me… the way she looks…

The way she talked, the way she acted… the- everything about her still the same.

The show- Blast- the day 4- 14- 14, Johnstown Pa.

So small- like I should have remembered- all in black with red, under the skirt, long hair. Looking sweet at me like I should have known. Yet I was babysitting to kid for the show thanks to my band teacher that that need was doing things he should not, with others bumping around the crowd. It was why I did get to say

more… she came all this way across the county for this moment, that was a failure, the show too. She looks amazing, I even said I should walk with her teacher- ‘Nah she is good; she would not want too anyway.’ Um- there the bathroom- over there… (Point) thank you… (She is looking said.) I do not even remember who I am I have that main IDs said- Kendrick.

(Time passing)

Spring…

Summer…

Fall…

Snow…

Like flayers all coming together on the land of white sown cover lovey lands. That is when she is showing her colors, like spring, the blossom showed, the love was back, for a mouth she played in my mind, like someone I used to know but have forgotten about, the fall day, playing head games in my body, like a run on a hot summer's day. All this in me yet her- I remember her- she did this till I got it who we meet and re-meet, it was all her- fate- right?

If I am still crazy about her- and she is me.

Turns out that Kristen Majah- I knew her teeth were too perfect; it was Anna Kendrick! As well as this story- is how- she said- yes to me… If you knew this, you would have killed yourselves- in my town right- I did not either- so excellent job acting Anna. And there it is a true love story in my book of life.

And now in me all the time- is her- the girl- her- that one- she- known as Kristen- or Anna- Yes you think you

know her, yet I do. She is all mine, and I hers…

Me- The boy I feel for all the years back in that shitty town so long ago… is him… it is all the same just know I am to you, yet now I am famous, I was just starting then. But then again, I am back for him now- he is all mine- you F-ed up- girls!

I will never forget to get that flirty eye look she gave me.

~Yes~ him

~Yes~ her

The flashback ages of us back then, she was 9 and I was 13.

-Get this my first date was with her, at a chine's restraint…

Him- Never at that time did she was Anna, and her dad is who he is… I keep calling him Feud… Identify forbidden to you.